

**Shifting selves: identity quests and innovation  
in the novels of  
Marguerite Duras, Patrick Modiano  
and Marie Darrieussecq**

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## **Dedication**

**For my husband Rodney, in appreciation of his patience, forbearance  
and invaluable technical assistance**

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## **Conventions**

In this thesis I have followed the guidelines laid down in the Modern Humanities Research Association style book. As regards quotations from primary sources, these are taken from the first edition of each author's work, except in those cases where in the Bibliography another edition is given in square brackets after the reference to the first edition. Unless I have specified otherwise, there are no textual differences between the first and later editions and I have chosen to use a later edition solely on the grounds of accessibility.



## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the prevalence of the identity quest in contemporary French fiction through detailed analysis of the novels of Marguerite Duras, Patrick Modiano and Marie Darrieussecq. I establish how, for these three writers from successive generations, the preoccupation with selfhood entails a retreat to the margins, where the shifting nature of identity can be better explored. By considering topics such as national, gender and family identity, I uncover both marked similarities and significant differences in their depiction of selfhood, thus illustrating how the central themes of the literary identity quest lend themselves to innovative permutation. I then turn to the subject of genre and narrative form, demonstrating how each author's overriding concern with identity leads both to formal experimentation and to genre mixing involving the crossing of traditional boundaries and the rejection of convention. The thesis goes on to explore the effect of the centrality of the identity quest on narrative structure, showing how the frequent recourse to memory by the three writers affects the chronology of their novels as linearity is replaced by new narrative shapes. Finally I move to the linguistic sphere, tracing the connection between the authors' use of personal pronouns and narrative tenses and the imperatives of the identity quest.

While Duras's novels and Modiano's earlier works have been extensively studied, Modiano's later writing and the totality of Darrieussecq's literary output have not yet received much critical attention. Additionally, literary critics have failed to address more than cursorily the linguistic topics which I explore. By demonstrating that the central theme of identity affects the form, structure and language of the novels of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq, I reveal common threads linking these very different articulations of selfhood, which suggest a measure of continuity in the French literary identity quest of the last seventy years.

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## Introduction

In the climate of uncertainty which characterises the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, identity has become a major literary preoccupation, as writers engage with the process of redefining the self in a world dominated by instability and flux. The increasing disruption of personal, family and social life by factors such as the abandonment of belief systems, marital breakdown and the dispersal and dislocation of communities due to conflict and economic pressures has led to the progressive abandonment of the notion of identity as fixed or imposed from outside. Instead, identity is perceived more and more as dynamic and negotiable, involving a constant reappraisal of selfhood through interaction with both the rapidly changing present and with the past.

My aim in this thesis is to explore this interrogation and recreation of identity in modern French fiction through a detailed study of the novels of three prominent writers, Marguerite Duras, Patrick Modiano and Marie Darrieussecq, for whom the search for self is paramount. These authors come from successive generations, so that an examination of their fictional reassessments of selfhood will shed light on developments in the expression and construction of identity in the French novel over the last seventy years. A brief summary of the output of my selected writers follows.

Marguerite Duras, an author of international standing, needs little introduction. Born in 1914, she published her first novel in 1943 and continued to write until her death in 1996. Her extensive *oeuvre* includes numerous novels, plays and films, all of which revolve round a fundamental reappraisal of the feminine condition in the modern world. A rebel whose work cannot be fitted into any literary category, she addresses through her fiction many of the central concerns of the second half of the twentieth century.

Born in 1945, Patrick Modiano, like Duras, belongs to no identifiable literary school. Though lacking Duras's global reputation, he has gained a considerable readership in France through the publication since 1968 of a steady stream of *romans* and *récits*, all dealing with the theme of the personal search for self in a format loosely based on the detective story. He has also written a filmscript, plays and children's books. His most recent work, which appeared in 2005, is an autobiographical fragment which appears to signal the end of his personal identity quest.

Marie Darrieussecq, born in 1968, rapidly rose to prominence after the appearance of her first novel in 1996. Since then she has published five more novels, an autobiographical work and a number of short stories, confirming her reputation as one of France's most promising young writers. In her fiction, which cannot easily be pigeonholed, she deals with feminine identity in a changing world, drawing frequently on myth and fantasy. Significantly, she has cited both Duras and Modiano as sources of inspiration in her literary exploration of selfhood.<sup>1</sup>

Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq are linked not only by their preoccupation with identity but also by their innovative approach to the search for self. While they remain on the fringe of distinct literary schools, their adventurousness reflects certain major developments in the modern French novel. All three authors can be seen, for example, to be following in the footsteps of Proust, the publication of whose seminal work *A la recherche du temps perdu* was instrumental in reinvigorating a genre which, as Rabaté points out, had run out of inspiration.<sup>2</sup> Proust's memory-based narratives, in which linearity and circularity are combined in a 'boucle ouverte',<sup>3</sup> are echoed in the fictional identity quests of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq. Gide's use of the *mise en abyme* to reflect on the process of writing, together with his rejection of narrative closure, is also reflected in their writing.<sup>4</sup> The penchant of the three authors for experimentation calls to mind, too, the radical revolution of the *nouveau roman*, which dominated French literature between 1955 and 1968. Writing at this time, Duras forsook the conventional style of her early novels, producing works such as *Moderato cantabile* (1958), whose slight narrative and unresolved ending mirror the increasing subjectivity of the *nouveau roman*. For Duras, as for the *nouveaux romanciers*, however, the progressive rejection of traditional plot and character led to a dead end: her abandonment of the novel for the theatre and the cinema at the end of the 1960s parallels the demise of the *nouveau roman*. Since 1968, new developments in the novel have been noted in which, while some of the experimental features of the *nouveau roman* have been preserved, a return to the subject and to storytelling is in evidence.<sup>5</sup> Modiano's and Darrieussecq's fiction, as well as Duras's later

<sup>1</sup> She acknowledges her debt to Duras in 'Marguerite Duras', *Europe* 921, 22, (January-February 2006), 162-5, and quotes Modiano as one of her favourite novelists in Amy Concannon and Kerry Sweeney, 'Entretiens exclusifs de Marie Darrieussecq' ([http://www.uri.edu/artsci/ml/durand/darrieussecq/fr/ent\\_exclusif.html](http://www.uri.edu/artsci/ml/durand/darrieussecq/fr/ent_exclusif.html) March 2004).

<sup>2</sup> See Dominique Rabaté, *Le Roman français depuis 1900* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33-5.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Rabaté, *op. cit.*, p. 102, Bruno Blanckeman, *Les Récits indécidables* (Paris: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2000), pp. 15-16 and Colin Davis and Elizabeth Fallaize, *French Fiction in the Mitterrand Years: Memory, Narrative, Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 13.

works, written after her return to novel writing in 1984, exemplify this trend in which, as Blanckeman has observed, the linear narrative of the traditional novel is replaced by a plot which no longer follows a fixed time sequence.<sup>6</sup> As in the *nouveau roman*, reader participation is required in these *récits indécidables* (as Blanckeman terms them), where uncertainty is a key element in the narrative. The renewed interest in the subject in such undecidable novels is reflected in a gradual erosion of the boundaries between fiction and autobiography, pioneered by Modiano before being defined as *autofiction* by Doubrovsky in 1977.<sup>7</sup> This changed literary climate facilitated Duras's triumphant return to the genre with *L'Amant* (1984), which revolutionised the fictional portrayal of selfhood. Permeability between genres, as Rabaté has observed, also extends to other areas, such as the incorporation of elements from fable and crime fiction into the late twentieth-century novel.<sup>8</sup> This genre mixing, as we shall see, is common to my three selected authors. Thus their writing reflects the fluidity and flexibility of the contemporary French novel which is characterized by an engagement with the flux and instability of the modern world.

The overall aim of my thesis is to trace how my chosen authors' explorations of selfhood in their novels have contributed to the development of the literary identity quest in modern French fiction. How has the prominence of the search for self affected the writers' use of genre, narrative structure and language? Can any common patterns be discerned? In order to address these questions, I divide the thesis into four chapters. In Chapter 1, after discussing recent developments in the perception of identity, I consider my chosen authors' contrasting articulations of the search for self through an examination of the relative importance of the subtopics of national, gender and family identity in their novels. Chapter 2 asks how each writer's quest for selfhood leads to formal innovation involving genre mixing, in which the autobiographical, elements from crime fiction and, in Darrieussecq's case, the fantastic are incorporated into the novel. In Chapter 3, I narrow down the enquiry to a consideration of their use of narrative structure, tracing the effects of memory on the chronology of all three writers as well as examining the consequences for the narrative of the tension between quest and flight. In Chapter 4, I turn to the linguistic sphere, exploring how the imperatives of the fictional identity quest influence the authors' use of personal pronouns and narrative tenses. In moving from the general to the particular, I reveal surprising similarities in approach between my contrasting authors, suggesting some broader underlying patterns in the postmodern French identity quest.

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<sup>6</sup> See *Les Récits indécidables*, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> See the back cover of his novel *Fils* (Paris: Galilée, 1977).

<sup>8</sup> See *Le Roman français depuis 1900*, pp. 94-101.

As regards methodology, I draw on underpinning theoretical material to frame my argument in each chapter. Having related aspects of my chosen authors' fiction to the theory in question in the light of previous critical responses to these topics, where they exist, I develop the argument further through close textual analysis of selected works by Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq. My primary material is the three writers' novels, though I make passing reference to other works by them. Because the thesis focuses on developments in the novel, I am explicitly excluding from it any discussion of Duras's theatre and films. In selecting works for detailed study I have chosen those which match the topic under discussion, concentrating, in the case of Duras and Modiano, on their major novels, though more minor works have not been excluded from consideration. My secondary sources include the authors' own comments on their work, critical studies of their fiction and a considerable body of other material, mainly from the fields of literary poetics and linguistics. Because of the large body of critical material available on Duras and the growing number of studies of Modiano's novels, I have been quite selective, choosing those works which deal with aspects of their writing of particular relevance to my study or which provide an overview of their fiction, especially more recent works which provide an insight into each author's literary development. In the case of Darrieussecq, because of the paucity of published criticism of her work, I have drawn quite extensively on newspaper articles and interviews with the author. I shall now review the background to my thesis, using the chapter headings as a framework.

## The Problem of Identity

In examining my chosen authors' fictional exploration of selfhood, I take as my starting point Jean-Claude Kaufmann's recent sociological study entitled *L'Invention de soi: Une théorie de l'identité*.<sup>9</sup> In this work, Kaufmann distinguishes between three phases in the historical perception of identity: a first phase, lasting until the eighteenth century, in which identity was perceived collectively, a second phase, coinciding with the Enlightenment, in which identity, while recognised as individual, was largely defined from outside, and a third stage, dating from the social turmoil of the 1960s, when this imposed view of identity was finally called into question. The identity quests of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq will be discussed in the light of Kaufmann's performative definition of identity as 'un processus, historiquement nouveau, consistant à sortir de soi (par l'image ou l'émotion)

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<sup>9</sup> Paris: Armand Colin, 2004.

pour s'inventer différent'.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, this search for self is frequently carried out through writing: as Nicola King has observed, 'It is commonly accepted that identity, or a sense of self, is constructed by and through narrative: the stories we all tell ourselves and each other about our lives'.<sup>11</sup>

The preoccupation of the three writers with identity has been well documented. Leslie Hill, in his seminal work *Marguerite Duras: Apocalyptic Desires*,<sup>12</sup> emphasises Duras's concern with this issue in the context of female sexual desire. Describing her work as the elaboration of a 'personal myth',<sup>13</sup> he traces its development culminating in the 'undecidable merging of identities'<sup>14</sup> of her later novels. Christiane Blot-Labarrère describes Duras as the subject of her own fiction: 'On aboutit donc à une permanente mise en scène du moi'.<sup>15</sup> In her examination of Duras's creation of character, she notes a tendency on the one hand towards the formation of multiple identities (as in the character of Jacques Hold in *Le Ravissement de Lol.V. Stein*)<sup>16</sup> and on the other hand towards the merging of identities (as in the fusion between the younger brother and the Chinese lover to which Duras confessed: 'Le petit frère était le Chinois finalement. C'est ça mon secret').<sup>17</sup> Thus, for Duras, identity is unstable and constantly changing.

The fundamental importance of the identity crisis at the heart of Modiano's work has been recognised by critics such as Alan Morris, who regards Modiano's *oeuvre* as stemming from his emotional need to solve this crisis.<sup>18</sup> Morris stresses the ambiguous nature of the identity quest in Modiano's novels: identity is both something to aspire to and to avoid, as a source of danger.<sup>19</sup> In a more recent work, Morris places increasing emphasis on the theme of identity, stating that: 'De toutes les préoccupations de Patrick Modiano, la plus fondamentale, c'est sans aucun doute l'identité. C'est le sujet qui relie et explique en quelque sorte tous les autres dont il traite dans son œuvre'.<sup>20</sup> Two of the four chapters of this short book are devoted to the subject of *identité/altérité*, the latter being symbolized by Modiano's curious use of the *principe du bis*, the use of phantom addresses which have no individual identity.<sup>21</sup> Two other recent critics of Modiano each include a chapter on the

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 257.

<sup>11</sup> Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> London: Routledge, 1993.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>15</sup> Christiane Blot-Labarrère, *Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 256.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>17</sup> From 'Au-delà des pages', TF1, June-July 1988, quoted in Blot-Labarrère, *Marguerite Duras*, p. 181.

<sup>18</sup> Alan Morris, *Patrick Modiano* (Oxford: Berg, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>20</sup> Alan Morris, *Patrick Modiano* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24-5.

subject of identity: Martine Guyot-Bender dwells on the fragile identity of many of Modiano's protagonists together with the ambiguous status of the author/narrator in works such as *De si braves garçons*,<sup>22</sup> while Thierry Laurent examines the tension between Modiano's fascination with his Jewish roots and his identification with France.<sup>23</sup>

Though Darrieussecq's fictional exploration of selfhood is less overtly personal than that of Modiano, a similarity between the two authors' literary preoccupations has been noted by Shirley Jordan: 'Darrieussecq's fictional universe is thematically obsessive; like Patrick Modiano, she has in essence one story to tell. The disappearance of loved ones, solitude and mourning, ghosts and hauntings, broken families and family secrets are the raw materials to which she returns with obsessive determination, working them up then unraveling them to reintegrate them into new and formally more ambitious patterns.'<sup>24</sup> In a recent interview, Darrieussecq describes the underlying theme of her work in terms of the articulation of the *non-dit* which she perceives to be at the heart of family life. She explores and recreates identity by giving voice to this silence and expressing the unexpressed: 'Du non-dit naissent les fantômes ...Écrire, c'est donner voix aux fantômes'.<sup>25</sup>

The subthemes of national, gender and family identity in my authors' novels have not all received the same amount of critical attention. As far as national identity is concerned, the importance for Modiano of this topic has been widely recognised. Morris describes his first novel, *La Place de l'étoile*, as 'an intense examination of Jewish identity'<sup>26</sup> although, as Baptiste Roux has observed, Modiano was not strictly speaking Jewish, Jewishness being inherited through the maternal line.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, as Laurent points out, he had been baptized as a Christian.<sup>28</sup> Nettelbeck and Hueston see Modiano's deliberate undermining of Jewish identity in his first novel as an attack on the French anti-semitism of the nineteen thirties and forties, which, by stereotyping and demonising the

<sup>22</sup> Martine Guyot-Bender, *Mémoire en derive: Poétique et politique de l'ambiguïté chez Patrick Modiano* (Paris-Caen: Lettres Modernes Minard, 1999), pp. 12-24.

<sup>23</sup> Thierry Laurent: *L'Oeuvre de Patrick Modiano: Une autofiction* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1997), pp. 67-76.

<sup>24</sup> Shirley Jordan: 'Un grand coup de pied dans le château de cubes': Formal experimentation in Marie Darrieussecq's *Bref séjour chez les vivants* in *The Modern Language Review*, 100, 1, (2005), p. 53.

<sup>25</sup> From Becky Miller et Martha Holmes, 'Entretien exclusif de Marie Darrieussecq' (March 2001) ([http://www.uri.edu/artsci/ml/durand/darrieussecq/fr/ent\\_exclusif.html](http://www.uri.edu/artsci/ml/durand/darrieussecq/fr/ent_exclusif.html))

<sup>26</sup> See *Collaboration and Resistance Reviewed: Writers and the Mode Rétro in Post-Gaullist France* (Oxford: Berg, 1992), p. 145.

<sup>27</sup> See *Figures de l'Occupation dans l'oeuvre de Patrick Modiano* (Paris-Montreal: L'Harmattan, 1999), p. 276.

<sup>28</sup> *L'Oeuvre de Patrick Modiano*, p. 67.



French Jews, forced many of them to collaborate as a means of self-protection.<sup>29</sup> After *La Place de l'étoile*, the theme of *judéité* recedes: as Roux has noted, it is absent from his second novel, *La Ronde de nuit*,<sup>30</sup> and subsequent narrators, while imitating, according to Guyot-Bender, the behaviour of the wandering Jew, do not identify themselves as Jewish.<sup>31</sup> Integration into French society, however, proves elusive for these characters, who suffer, as Bedner has observed, from 'une ambiguïté profonde à l'égard de la France'.<sup>32</sup> In his later writing, Modiano's search for self takes on a collective dimension, as his personal quest is transmuted into that of an entire generation cut off from its roots. Morris situates Modiano's work in this context, identifying him as one of a 'generation of orphans in search of a heritage'<sup>33</sup> and outlining his contribution to the *mode rétro*. The historian Henri Rouso, tracing the history of the Vichy syndrome, also identifies Modiano's role in dispelling the myth of *résistencialisme*.<sup>34</sup>

In contrast, the issue of national identity in the novels of Duras and Darrieussecq has not been the subject of much comment. This is surprising in Duras's case in the light of the strong views expressed by the author herself on the subject. Describing how she was brought up speaking Vietnamese as well as French, she reveals an early failure to identify with her mother country: 'En somme, un jour j'ai *appris* que j'étais française'.<sup>35</sup> Blot-Labarrère, one of the few critics to devote much space to the topic of national identity, traces Duras's empathy with the wandering Jew to this confused upbringing, which caused her to carry memories of the land of her childhood around with her for the rest of her life.<sup>36</sup> She considers, however, that the author's attitude changed after the Second World War, when she regained a sense of Frenchness.<sup>37</sup> Madeleine Borgomano, commenting on Duras's use of naming, also identifies a Jewish element in the author's predilection for the name Stein(er), suggesting empathy on the author's part with the victims of the Holocaust.<sup>38</sup> As regards Darrieussecq, her increasing concern with national identity has yet to be studied at length. She herself, however, has revealed her fascination with the Basque

<sup>29</sup> Colin Nettelbeck and Penelope Hueston, *Pièces d'identité: Écrire l'entretemps* (Paris: Lettres Modernes, 1986), p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> *Figures de l'Occupation*, p. 55.

<sup>31</sup> *Mémoire en dérive*, pp. 36-7.

<sup>32</sup> Jules Bedner, 'Patrick Modiano: Visages de l'étranger' in Jules Bedner (ed.), *Patrick Modiano* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), p. 52.

<sup>33</sup> *Collaboration and Resistance Reviewed*, p. 88.

<sup>34</sup> Henri Rouso, *Le Syndrome de Vichy de 1944 à nos jours*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Paris: Seuil, 1990), pp. 149-53.

<sup>35</sup> Marguerite Duras and Michelle Porte, *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1977), p. 60, authors' italics.

<sup>36</sup> *Marguerite Duras*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>37</sup> *Marguerite Duras*, p. 61.

<sup>38</sup> Madeleine Borgomano, *Marguerite Duras: Le Ravisement de Lol V. Stein* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), pp. 27-8.

language and culture, stressing, in her autobiographical work *Le Bébé*, her nostalgia for 'cette langue de mon enfance' which she has subsequently forgotten (p. 144).

As regards gender identity, Duras and Darrieussecq both explore selfhood from a feminine perspective. Neither author, however, perceives her writing as feminist: Duras states in *La Vie matérielle*: 'J'écris sur les femmes pour écrire sur moi' (p. 59) and Darrieussecq, in *Le Bébé*, dismisses feminine writing in the following terms: 'Il n'y a pas d'écriture féminine, évidemment' (p. 50). I shall not, therefore, engage more than briefly with feminism in this thesis, while taking into account the undoubted influence of the French feminists Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva on both authors, as well as that of second-wave feminism on Darrieussecq. In this context, the summary of feminist theory provided by Toril Moi in *Sexual/Textual Politics* provides useful background material. Having outlined Lacan's seminal theory of the Imaginary and the Symbolic Order, Moi examines the work of Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva.<sup>39</sup> Cixous, in her elaboration of a theory of *écriture féminine*, returns to a pre-patriarchal world dominated by the mother figure, of which there are echoes in literary universes of Duras and Darrieussecq, where liminal settings abound, female figures prevail and men are relegated to a subordinate position. As Stephanie Anderson has observed, Cixous held Duras in high esteem, regarding her as a model of feminine writing.<sup>40</sup> Irigaray's fascination with mysticism has parallels in Duras's use of the figure of the witch and in Darrieussecq's recourse to the ghost. Kristeva's distinction, following Lacan, between the Semiotic Order, linked to the mother and the pre-Oedipal phase, and the Symbolic Order, based on the father and the acquisition of language, can be seen to have influenced Duras and Darrieussecq, impelling them to experiment with instinctive and intuitive modes of thought and expression. Kristeva herself was fascinated by Duras's work, devoting a chapter to it in *Soleil noir: depression et mélancolie*,<sup>41</sup> in which she underlines Duras's preoccupation with death, destruction and madness, alluding to the merging of identities which occurs in the Durassian double.

Victoria Best examines the Durassian female archetypes of the mother, the madwoman and the *femme fatale* in the light of Kristeva's theory that an incomplete break from her mother leading to depression and melancholy is at the heart of Duras's writing. Best concludes that the *femme fatale* can be seen as a fantasy or alternative mother whose

<sup>39</sup> See Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 89-166).

<sup>40</sup> Stephanie Anderson, *Le Discours féminin de Marguerite Duras: Un désir pervers et ses métamorphoses* (Geneva: Droz, 1995), p. 7.

<sup>41</sup> Paris: Gallimard, 1987.

seduction of her lover is a re-enactment of the primal scene, while the madwoman reduplicates the mother figure. In this context, 'the other, as mother, lover or displaced double, is represented as ultimately desirable, intoxicatingly dangerous and threateningly uncontrollable'.<sup>42</sup> Bodily communication is impossible, leading to fragmentation of identity and the implosion of the narrative. This bleak reading of Duras's work contrasts with Raynalle Udris's more upbeat interpretation of Duras's progressive rejection of selfhood. In a perceptive study of madness in Duras's writing, Udris traces the connection between this condition in the author's female protagonists and the witch, a figure which, inspired by the nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet's work, *La Sorcière* (1862), Duras introduced into her work in the 1970s. Abandoned by her husband during the Crusades, the witch retreated to the silence of the forests and came to embody, for Duras, the mysterious woman who is incomprehensible to man. These female figures lead their male partners into a state of unreason culminating in the loss of identity, which, for Udris, has a positive dimension, involving identification with the female Other.<sup>43</sup>

Darrieussecq, though rejecting feminine writing, does describe herself as a feminist: 'Je suis athée, féministe et européenne'.<sup>44</sup> The subject of her first novel, *Truismes*, a woman's fall into prostitution and her metamorphosis into a sow, might at first seem surprising in this context, as it could be interpreted as anti-feminist. The unacceptability of this interpretation has, however, been stressed by the author, who strongly rejects any misogynist or pornographic reading of this text<sup>45</sup> and has given a clear description of the scope of the work as a 'manifeste littéraire: l'aventure d'une femme aliénée ... qui peu à peu se libère des clichés pour trouver sa voix ... Elle doit donc inventer sa voix ... pour se dégager des truismes'.<sup>46</sup> In her subsequent novels, she examines feminine issues of contemporary relevance, such as female autonomy and the conflicting demands of motherhood, stressing the continuing need for women to forge their own identities.

Difficult family relationships underlie the fictional identity quests of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq. The centrality of the reassessment of troubled family relationships in Modiano's fictional identity quest has been recognized by Roux, who defines the author's literary aim as follows: 'de pourvoir l'écrivain d'une filiation et d'une

<sup>42</sup> Victoria Best, *Critical Subjectivities: Identity and Narrative in the Works of Colette and Marguerite Duras* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000), p. 165.

<sup>43</sup> Raynalle Udris, *Welcome Unreason: A Study of 'Madness' in the Novels of Marguerite Duras* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), pp. 202-236.

<sup>44</sup> See Holmes and Miller, 'entretien exclusif'.

<sup>45</sup> In a lecture entitled 'Comment j'écris', given at the Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies on 26/06/03.

<sup>46</sup> See Holmes and Miller, 'entretien exclusif'.

identité qu'il ne possède pas'.<sup>47</sup> Modiano's search for his emotionally distant father has received much critical attention, notably from Morris and Laurent. Morris, describing Modiano's prototypical narrator as coming from a 'vide au niveau de la famille',<sup>48</sup> traces how the failure of the quest for this elusive figure leads both to attempts to find a surrogate 'père d'élection',<sup>49</sup> and to the plunge into collective memory to expiate the guilt induced by the father's collaboration. Laurent, in a chapter on the father, isolates constants in the writer's depiction of him: he is at once a wandering Jew, a dishonest trafficker and a weak character who abandons his child.<sup>50</sup> Comments on the mother from critics such as these are at once more limited and less apt, having been written before the publication in 2001 of *La Petite Bijou*, in which, by transmuting the father's quest for the son into the daughter's search for the mother, Modiano engages more fully than before with the maternal. Thus Morris, apart from noting the author's predilection for mothers with theatrical backgrounds like his own, devotes little space to this figure.<sup>51</sup> Laurent, on the other hand, includes a chapter on the mother in which he dwells on the absence of the 'quête de la mère' from Modiano's novels, a conclusion which no longer holds good.<sup>52</sup> His chapter on the lost brother, Rudy, is useful in that it emphasizes the paradox in which naming of the brother decreases after the first eight novels, which are dedicated to him, while unnamed references to him increase.<sup>53</sup> Modiano's quite frequent covert allusions to the brother in his most recent fiction have not, however, received a great deal of critical attention.

Aliette Armel considers that Duras's difficult relations with her mother inspired her to write: 'l'acte d'écrire est d'abord un moyen de s'opposer à la mère'.<sup>54</sup> Sylvie Loignon goes further, viewing Duras's fiction as a 'roman familial' consisting of an imaginary reconstruction of her own 'famille en pierre'.<sup>55</sup> Like many other critics, she emphasises both the ambivalent and the mythical qualities of the Durassian mother, who, as Blot-Labarrère has observed, appears in many guises in the writer's novels.<sup>56</sup> Loignon makes greater reference than the majority of critics to Duras's curious attitude to the father, describing him as 'un revenant qui nourrit la fantasmagorie durassienne' and likening him to the wandering Jew.<sup>57</sup> She also comments extensively on the author's use of

<sup>47</sup> *Figures de l'Occupation*, p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> Patrick Morris (2000), p. 49.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>50</sup> *L'Oeuvre de Patrick Modiano*, pp. 84-5.

<sup>51</sup> Patrick Modiano (2000), p. 52.

<sup>52</sup> *L'Oeuvre de Patrick Modiano*, p. 116.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>54</sup> Aliette Armel, *Marguerite Duras et l'autobiographie* (Paris: Le Castor Astral, 1990), p. 40.

<sup>55</sup> Sylvie Loignon, *Marguerite Duras* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003), p. 12.

<sup>56</sup> Blot-Labarrère, *Marguerite Duras*, p. 80.

<sup>57</sup> Loignon, *Marguerite Duras*, p. 22.

transposition, in which brothers replace fathers, and lovers and brothers are interchangeable. The incest with the younger brother revealed belatedly by Duras in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* is seen by Loignon as fundamental to the writer's exploration of identity.<sup>58</sup>

Darrieussecq's examination of family identity in the context of the search for selfhood has yet to receive extensive treatment, though Jordan has commented on her generally unfavourable depiction of the mother: 'Darrieussecq's fiction develops several examples of dysfunctional mother-child relationships which usually explore how daughters are let down by their mothers'.<sup>59</sup> The even harsher portrayal of the authoritarian father and the poignant figure of the lost brother add to this negative picture of the family, which, as the author has revealed in a recent interview, underlies her compulsion to write: 'Il y a un fantôme dans ma famille, un deuil dont on ne parle pas. Moi, si. Écrire c'est ma façon de parler. [...] Il faut enterrer les morts pour faire la paix avec eux, et pour qu'ils nous laissent en paix aussi. Tous mes livres parlent de ça'.<sup>60</sup> Thus the exposure of the damage caused to the individual by disturbed family relations is central to her literary endeavour.

## Genre, narrative form and the identity quest

The blurring of generic boundaries has been described as a characteristic of the French novel of the latter part of the twentieth century by a number of critics. Johnnie Gratton, for example, in his examination of the French fiction of this period, emphasises this generic diversity which he regards as an expression of postmodernism. He accepts Edmund Smyth's definition of the *nouveau roman* and its immediate successors as postmodern, quoting Smyth's evaluation of novels of the 1980s such as Duras's *L'Amant* as revealing 'a postmodernist contestation of the conventional boundaries between genres'.<sup>61</sup> Bruno Blanckeman observes that, in the *récit indécidable*, literary conventions concerning genre are less strictly adhered to than formerly: 'Sans se décomposer, le roman s'autodétourne sporadiquement à des degrés variables'.<sup>62</sup> My three chosen authors all resort at times to genre mixing, turning to autobiography, crime fiction and, in Darrieussecq's case, fantasy to illuminate the fictional exploration of selfhood, as I shall demonstrate in Chapter 2.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>59</sup> Shirley Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005), p. 94.

<sup>60</sup> Olivia de Lamberterie, 'J'ai fait la paix avec mes fantômes', *Elle*, 10 September 2001.

<sup>61</sup> See Edmund Smyth, 'The *Nouveau Roman*: Modernity and Postmodernity' in Edmund Smyth (ed.), *Postmodernism and Contemporary Fiction* (London: Batsford, 1991), pp. 71-2 quoted in Johnnie Gratton, 'Postmodern French Fiction: Practice and Theory' in Timothy Unwin (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the French Novel from 1800 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 245.

<sup>62</sup> *Les Récits indécidables*, p. 16.

The use of autobiographical elements in the novels of Duras and Modiano has received considerable attention. Armel, for instance, quoting Duras ('J'écris. Ce qui m'émeut, c'est moi-même. Ce qui me donne envie de pleurer, c'est ma violence, c'est moi'),<sup>63</sup> traces the move towards autobiography in the author's work from 1980 onwards which culminated in the publication of *L'Amant* in 1984. Similarly, Thierry Laurent, citing Modiano's description of his work as 'une sorte d'autobiographie inconsciente et diffuse',<sup>64</sup> goes on to describe his work as autofictional.<sup>65</sup> Darrieussecq's more veiled use of the autobiographical, which has yet to be examined in detail, has been alluded to by the author, who has stated that 'mon imaginaire est nourri par ma vie et je finis par inventer des histoires qui lui ressemblent'.<sup>66</sup>

Philippe Lejeune's *Le Pacte autobiographique* is a necessary starting point for an understanding of autobiography and its relationship with fiction. According to him, 'Pour qu'il y ait autobiographie, il faut qu'il y ait identité de l'auteur, du narrateur et du personnage'.<sup>67</sup> Two other criteria are also essential, as Thomas Clerc has pointed out: the production of true information about the author and referentiality.<sup>68</sup> Clearly, however, writers of undecidable novels, such as my chosen authors, while drawing on autobiography, do not feel obliged to adhere to such conventions. The resulting hybrids have been the subject of considerable controversy: Armel, demonstrating that *L'Amant* violates the criteria mentioned above, categorises it under the rubric of the *pacte romanesque*,<sup>69</sup> which is characterised by its 'pratique patente de la non-identité' and 'attestation de fictivité',<sup>70</sup> although Duras herself stopped short of adding the description *roman* to the title. Laurent goes further, concluding that Modiano's work is not strictly autobiographical but postulating a 'pacte d'autofiction' to describe it.<sup>71</sup> It seems to me that it is in the context of autofiction that these experimental novels need to be considered.

Coined, as we have seen, by Doubrovsky in 1977, this new term has moved into the space left in Lejeune's study of autobiography between *pacte autobiographique* and *pacte romanesque*. Unfortunately, however, there is a lack of consensus as to the status of the new genre: as Clerc has noted, 'son ambiguïté indécidable constitue pour les uns une

<sup>63</sup> From Marguerite Duras, 'Moi' in *L'Autre Journal*, no.10, 30 avril 1986 quoted in Armel, 1990, p. 52.

<sup>64</sup> See Laurence Vidal, 'Le Passé recomposé', *Le Figaro Littéraire*, 4 January 1996, quoted in Laurent, 1997, p. 23.

<sup>65</sup> *L'Oeuvre de Patrick Modiano*, pp. 24-5.

<sup>66</sup> Pascale Frey, 'Marie Darrieussecq, l'écriture pour toujours', *Lire*, October 2001.

<sup>67</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p.15.

<sup>68</sup> Thomas Clerc, *Les Écrits personnels* (Paris: Hachette, 2001), p. 28.

<sup>69</sup> See *Le Pacte autobiographique*, p. 27.

<sup>70</sup> Marguerite Duras et *l'autobiographie*, p. 18.

<sup>71</sup> *L'Oeuvre de Patrick Modiano*, p. 20.

aberration théorique, pour les autres, elle s'avère force novatrice'.<sup>72</sup> Darrieussecq, in her capacity as a literary critic takes the latter view, emphasising the creative ambivalence of a literary form which, at one and the same time, 'demande à être crue *et* demande à être non crue'.<sup>73</sup> Laurent, too, endorses autofiction, applying Aragon's concept of *mentir-vrai*<sup>74</sup> to Modiano's work.<sup>75</sup> In discussing my selected authors' variable use of autobiographical material in their fiction, I shall argue that the emergence of autofiction parallels recent developments in the perception of identity and can thus be regarded as a valid genre.

Darrieussecq, in spite of her theoretical interest in autofiction, prefers to situate her exploration of selfhood on the borders between the realistic and the fantastic rather than on the frontier between autobiography and fiction. Fantasy, which emerged as a genre towards the end of the eighteenth century in the climate of scientific rationalism immediately preceding the Industrial Revolution, has been described by Roger Bozzetto and Arnaud Huftier as arising from a rupture between the traditional past and the more rational age which followed it, leading to an identity crisis: 'En tant que genre, le fantastique naît en effet lors d'une forte crise de la représentation, lorsque l'approche de la réalité par le développement de la rationalité scientifique se confronte durement aux croyances extérieures'.<sup>76</sup> Mellier, tracing the more recent development of the genre in France, stresses its subjective, psychological and intellectual nature, as defined by critics such as Roger Caillot and Louis Vax. For Caillot, the fantastic introduces rupture into a rational universe, while, for Vax, the self is called into question by the irruption of the supernatural.<sup>77</sup> Darrieussecq's use of the fantastic is indeed characterised by both rupture and self-questioning and can thus be seen to perpetuate this tradition.

Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq all have recourse to the flourishing popular genre of crime fiction in the context of the identity quest. The detective story, which came to the fore in the mid-nineteenth century, is characterised by its close adherence to a set of conventions. These have been examined by critics such as Tzvetan Todorov<sup>78</sup> and Martin Priestman,<sup>79</sup> who have defined subgenres such as the *roman à énigme*, the *roman à suspense* and the *roman noir*. Todorov's analysis of the first of these subgenres is particularly illuminating, as he likens the duality present in the whodunit to that identified

<sup>72</sup> *Les Écrits personnels*, p. 71.

<sup>73</sup> Marie Darrieussecq, 'L'Autofiction, un genre pas sérieux', *Poétique* 107, September 1996, author's italics.

<sup>74</sup> See Louis Aragon, *Le Mentir-vrai* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980).

<sup>75</sup> *L'Oeuvre de Patrick Modiano*, p. 10.

<sup>76</sup> Roger Bozzetto and Arnaud Huftier, *Les Frontières du fantastique: Approches de l'impensable en littérature* (Valenciennes: Presses Universitaires de Valenciennes, 2004), p. 151.

<sup>77</sup> See Denis Mellier, *La Littérature fantastique* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), pp. 12-15.

<sup>78</sup> See Tzvetan Todorov, 'Typologie du roman policier' in *Poétique de la prose* (Paris: Seuil, 1971).

<sup>79</sup> See Martin Priestman, *Crime Fiction from Poe to the Present* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1998).

in narrative by the Russian Formalists: the story of the original crime can be seen to correspond to the *fabula* and that of its reconstruction to the *sjuzhet*.<sup>80</sup> These considerations appear to me to be extremely relevant to Modiano's *oeuvre*, in which borrowings from detective fiction are much in evidence. Akane Kawakami, in her perceptive study of Modiano's art as a writer, examines these borrowings in some detail, concluding that they are both ludic and parodic: 'Modiano's novels bear a playful relation to detective fiction in that they are built round the conventions of this subgenre and raise the reader's expectations accordingly, but always fail to fulfil them'.<sup>81</sup> Clearly, although the element of quest through the re-examination of the past is common to the murder mystery and the search for self, Modiano's literary adventure far exceeds the scope of the traditional detective story, eschewing its neat but facile solutions. By means of selective and subversive use of conventions from the genre, the author emphasises the gulf between his anguished voyage of self-discovery and the artificial world of crime fiction. As Simon Kemp has observed, his novels can all be considered as failed investigations, in which the author depicts identity as 'transient and irrecoverable'.<sup>82</sup>

As her biographer Laure Adler has observed, Duras was fascinated by crime and crime fiction: 'Duras adore Agatha Christie. Comme elle, elle est fascinée par le côté ordinaire du crime et par la banalité – apparente – de la personnalité des criminels'.<sup>83</sup> Several of her novels are structured round crimes, but, as in the case of Modiano, she does not abide by the conventions of the detective story: mysteries remain unsolved and criminals are rarely apprehended. Like him, she uses those elements of the detective story which fit in with her overall aims, centred on the exploration of the unknowable and the inexpressible, as Madeleine Alleins has acknowledged in her critical response to *Moderato cantabile*: 'Ce livre ne nous permet pas de nous laisser glisser de geste en geste, d'événement en événement; avec lui nous sommes forcés de constater l'inconnu, qui est peut-être, qui demeurera peut-être l'inconnaissable'.<sup>84</sup> Darrieussecq, in her much slighter use of elements from crime fiction, continues in this subversive vein: *Naissance des fantômes* metamorphoses from a detective story into a metaphysical meditation on the

<sup>80</sup> 'Typologie du roman policier', p. 58.

<sup>81</sup> Akane Kawakami, *A Self-conscious Art: Patrick Modiano's Postmodern Fictions* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), p. 90.

<sup>82</sup> See *Defective Inspectors: Crime Fiction Pastiche in Late Twentieth-century French Literature* (London: Legenda, 2006), p. 3.

<sup>83</sup> Laure Adler, *Marguerite Duras* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), p. 414.

<sup>84</sup> See Madeleine Alleins, 'Un langage qui récuse la quiétude du savoir' in *Critique*, 7 July 1958, reprinted in '« Moderato cantabile » et la presse française' after the text of the novel in *Moderato cantabile* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1958), p. 164.



feminine condition while, in *Le Mal de mer*, narrative closure involving the resolution of a crime is achieved by the male protagonists but not by their female counterparts.

## Memory, Chronology and Narrative Structure

The novel has traditionally been associated with narrative. According to E. M. Forster, writing in 1927, 'We shall all agree that the fundamental aspect of the novel is its story-telling aspect'.<sup>85</sup> However, as noted above, this predominantly narrative aspect began to be called into question by the experimentation of authors such as Proust and Gide before being further undermined by the *nouveaux romanciers*. For Robbe-Grillet, in a universe which is no longer stable nor intelligible, 'Raconter est devenu proprement impossible',<sup>86</sup> while for Butor, the fact that: 'Nous ne vivons le temps comme continuité qu'à certains moments' necessitates a move from a linear narrative structure to a 'construction polyphonique'.<sup>87</sup>

The return of the narrative which has been so widely noted as characteristic of the novel of the post *nouveau roman* period is clearly linked to the emergence of the identity quest as a dominant theme, since, as Mark Currie has observed, 'narrative is central to the representation of identity, in personal memory and self-representation or in collective identity of groups such as regions, nations, race and gender'.<sup>88</sup> However the narrative structure of the postmodern *récit indécidable* is significantly different from that of the traditional Balzacian novel: chronology is frequently disrupted, the plot is characterised by circularity rather than linearity and narrative closure is rarely achieved. In considering the characteristics of this new narrative in Chapter 3, I shall draw on Paul Ricoeur's masterly summary of its emergence and nature in the opening chapter of *Temps et récit II*.<sup>89</sup> Ricoeur comments on the weakening of the plot: 'Peut-on encore parler d'intrigue, quand l'exploration des abîmes de la conscience paraît révéler l'impuissance du langage même à se rassembler et à prendre forme',<sup>90</sup> but concludes that the undecidable novel is organised according to new structural principles.

The use of these new narrative patterns by Duras and Modiano has received a certain amount of critical attention. Gratton, describing Duras's world as 'uncentred, non-

<sup>85</sup> E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Penguin Books, 1927, reprinted 1990), p. 40.

<sup>86</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1963), p. 37.

<sup>87</sup> Michel Butor, *Essais sur le roman* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1964), pp. 116, 106.

<sup>88</sup> Mark Currie, *Postmodern Narrative Theory* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 1998), p. 2.

<sup>89</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit II: La configuration du temps dans le récit de fiction* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), pp. 1-51.

<sup>90</sup> *Temps et récit*, p. 21.

teleological and non-linear', concludes that in order to make sense of this uncertainty, 'it becomes necessary to narrate according to a different temporal and thematic logic, one which incorporates displacement and digression, ellipsis and fragmentation'. This will entail a performative dimension in which 'act-value' takes precedence over 'truth-value'.<sup>91</sup> As far as Modiano is concerned, Morris alludes to 'la circularité qui caractérise l'oeuvre de Modiano' and to its 'éternel manque de clôture',<sup>92</sup> while Kawakami identifies space rather than time as the unifying element in Modiano's novels: 'Geographical coherence takes the place of chronological order in the consciousness of the narrator'.<sup>93</sup> Darrieussecq has herself emphasised the importance of structural and stylistic innovation in her writing: 'Je cherche à inventer de nouvelles formes, à écrire de nouvelles phrases, parce que c'est le seul moyen de rendre compte du monde moderne'.<sup>94</sup> I shall demonstrate that a range of new narrative patterns are common to my selected authors and are directly linked to their preoccupation with the exploration of selfhood, in which memory plays a significant part.

Memory is clearly crucial to identity formation, as past memories are used to shape the present self. Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq make extensive use of flashbacks in their novels as they examine the past in an attempt to understand the present. In order to assess the effects of my chosen authors' frequent recourse to memory on the chronology and structure of their novels, I have taken into account changes in the theory of memory formation and retrieval. Nicola King, in the opening chapter of her study entitled *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* provides a useful analysis of two contrasting models of memory, both of which are based on the work of Freud.<sup>95</sup> She demonstrates how Freud's earlier model of memory as archaeological excavation, first proposed in the 1890s and never entirely abandoned by him, which rests on the assumption that past memories, however deeply buried, can be recovered intact, has been largely superseded by a later model, *Nachträglichkeit*. This model, suggested by Freud in 1896 but not developed by him into a fully coherent theory, seems more appropriate to the postmodern era, since it envisages memories as being periodically retranscribed, a rearrangement which forms part of a process in which 'the construction of the self is a provisional and continuous process, rather than the 'recovery' of an 'original' identity'.<sup>96</sup> As King observes, this is similar to the role of narrative in modern autobiographical writing. Both remembering and writing can be seen as therapeutic, as traumatic past events are gradually interpreted and

<sup>91</sup> 'Postmodern French Fiction', p. 253.

<sup>92</sup> *Patrick Modiano* (2000), pp. 87, 89.

<sup>93</sup> 'L'Autofiction', pp. 28-9.

<sup>94</sup> See Holmes and Miller, 'Entretien exclusif'.

<sup>95</sup> Pp. 9-32.

<sup>96</sup> *Memory, Narrative, Identity*, p. 17.

incorporated into the present self. Paul Eakin supports this view in his elaboration of a theory of continuous identity in which memory is 'not only literally essential to the constitution of identity, but also critical in the sense that it is constantly revising and editing the remembered past to square with the needs and requirements of the self we have become in any present'.<sup>97</sup> Recent research by the eminent biologist Steven Rose on the plasticity of the brain also confirms this theory.<sup>98</sup> It seems to me that my three selected authors all use memory in this way in their writing.

The relationship of memory to history has been widely reassessed as a consequence of the traumatic events of the Holocaust, notably by Rousso in the context of the Vichy syndrome.<sup>99</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, like Rousso, sees memory as playing a necessary part in bearing witness to events which some historians would prefer to forget. For him, there is a tension between 'effacement', the obliteration of events, and 'conservation', where remembering the past prevents its falsification.<sup>100</sup> This is extremely relevant to Modiano's fiction, where the narrator is caught between the compulsion to flee from unbearably painful memories and the necessity of confronting them in order to establish the truth about the past, a polarity which, as I shall demonstrate, significantly affects the structure of his novels. As his fictional identity quest broadens to encompass the experience of the children of those involved in the Vichy regime, the link between memory and history becomes more marked: VanderWolk has noted that: 'In Modiano's novels, remembered events become historical',<sup>101</sup> while Roux, tracing the presence of the Occupation in Modiano's work, sees this period as 'un lieu de rêverie propre à l'inscription des histoires'.<sup>102</sup>

## Pronoun Switching and Tense Mixing

The concept of selfhood as shifting, which underlies the fictional identity quests of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq, is reflected linguistically in the authors' innovative use of personal pronouns and narrative tenses, the subject of the final chapter of the thesis. In discussing the three writers' reliance on pronoun switching, involving frequent changes in narrative perspective, and tense mixing, in which narrative tenses are combined in an

<sup>97</sup> Paul Eakin, 'Autobiography, Identity, and the Fictions of Memory' in Daniel Schacter and Elaine Scarry (eds.), *Memory, Brain and Belief* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 293-294.

<sup>98</sup> See Steven Rose, *The Making of Memory: From Molecules to Mind* (London: Vintage (revised edition), 2003).

<sup>99</sup> *Le Syndrome de Vichy*.

<sup>100</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Les Abus de la mémoire* (Paris: Arléa, 1988), pp. 9-17.

<sup>101</sup> William VanderWolk, *Rewriting the Past: Memory, History and Narration in the Novels of Patrick Modiano* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), p. 6.

<sup>102</sup> *Figures de l'Occupation*, p. 29.

unorthodox fashion, I shall draw on material from both the literary and the linguistic fields, relying more heavily on literary poetics in the case of pronoun usage and turning to linguistics to illuminate my chosen authors' innovative use of narrative tenses.

The selection of first- or third-person narrative by a writer of fiction is clearly dictated by the relationship between the author, the narrator and the subject. In the new narrative, which is characterised by the return of the subject and the blurring of genre boundaries, the traditional distance between author and narrator has narrowed perceptibly. Thus, in the novels of my chosen authors, the omniscient author has all but disappeared and the central protagonist bears a varying degree of resemblance to the author. In examining the shifting relationship between author, narrator and subject, I shall draw on Gérard Genette's useful definition of the narrative as autodiegetic, homodiegetic or heterodiegetic, according to the narrator's degree of involvement in the story, and as intradiegetic or extradiegetic, depending on the narrator's position inside or outside this fictitious world. Genette has also introduced the very useful concept of focalisation to express the relationship between the author, narrator and the characters in a novel, going from 'absence de focalisation' (omniscience) through 'focalisation externe' (detachment) to 'focalisation interne' (involvement).<sup>103</sup> This concept of points of view, which can shift within a novel, has been further discussed by Ricoeur, who envisages the possibility of the 'roman polyphonique'<sup>104</sup> with multiple narrators. I shall demonstrate that my three authors make extensive use of shifting narrative viewpoints and also at times have recourse to dual or multiple narration: Darrieussecq's *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, for example, is a prime example of a polyphonic novel.

The issue of pronoun selection has received attention from both linguistics specialists and literary critics. As Émile Benveniste has observed, the first person is subjective: 'la forme *je* n'a d'existence linguistique que dans l'acte de parole qui la profère', while the third person, the unmarked form, refers to an objective situation and can be seen as a 'non-personne'.<sup>105</sup> Given the subjective nature of the identity quest, the choice of a first-person narrator would seem natural, as is indeed the case in Modiano's novels, which are nearly all written in the first person. The first person would also seem appropriate for autobiography, but, as Lejeune has pointed out, while the first person is the normal pronoun for this genre, 'il est fort possible d'écrire autrement qu'à la première personne': he goes on to cite the case of Butor's *La Modification* as an example of a novel

<sup>103</sup> Gérard Genette, *Nouveau discours du récit* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), pp. 48-52.

<sup>104</sup> *Temps et récit*, p. 144.

<sup>105</sup> Émile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), pp. 252, 256.

written in the second person.<sup>106</sup> He also points out that: 'il peut très bien y avoir identité du narrateur et du personnage principal dans le cas du récit « à la troisième personne »'.<sup>107</sup> This is demonstrated by Duras in *L'Amant*, sections of which are written in the third person despite the autobiographical nature of the subject material. The element which is neglected by the above critics is that of pronoun switching, to which my three chosen authors all have recourse as they explore the shifting sands of identity construction. Duras, by alternating between a first and third-person narrator in *L'Amant*, 'oscillates ceaselessly between separation and fusion',<sup>108</sup> while the use of multiple pronouns (*je*, *tu* and *il*) to designate the narrator in Modiano's *La Place de l'étoile* has been described by Morris as 'a fragmentation of narrative voice',<sup>109</sup> and Darrieussecq goes even further in her experimentation by using a single pronoun (*elle*) in *Le Mal de mer* to refer to several female characters who are not differentiated by name, thereby inducing a feeling of 'flottement' between them.<sup>110</sup> This novel technique has not to my knowledge been considered in detail in relation to the overarching theme of the identity quest. All the above-mentioned uses of pronouns introduce changes in perspective as single identities are seen from different angles and separate identities are fused. I shall therefore deal with this subject at some length, demonstrating how each author uses pronoun switching in the context of the search for self.

As regards narrative tense usage, the curious relationship which exists in French between the two rival narrative tenses, the *passé simple* and the *passé composé*, has been commented on extensively by linguistics specialists. Ayres-Bennett and Carruthers, for example, provide a useful summary of the historical development of this relationship, in which they demonstrate how the *passé simple*, which originally served both as a present perfective and a past punctual, gradually lost the former function and became relegated to the written language.<sup>111</sup> For Henriette Walter, the demise of the *passé simple* in the spoken language is attributable both to the complexity of its forms and to the gradual shift observable in French from a synthetic to a more analytic verb system.<sup>112</sup> The remoteness of the *passé simple* in Modern French, which renders it inappropriate in most spoken contexts, is emphasised by Henry Schogt in his definition of the tense: 'Un passé simple

<sup>106</sup> *Le Pacte autobiographique*, p. 16.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>108</sup> Hill, *Marguerite Duras*, p. 123.

<sup>109</sup> *Collaboration and Resistance Reviewed*, p. 145.

<sup>110</sup> This term was used by the author to describe her work in a talk entitled 'Comment j'écris', given at the Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies on June 20<sup>th</sup> 2003.

<sup>111</sup> Wendy Ayres-Bennett and Janice Carruthers, *Problems and Perspectives: Studies in the Modern French Language* (London: Longman, 2001), pp. 164-189.

<sup>112</sup> Henriette Walter, *Le français dans tous les sens* (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1988), p. 103.

rapporte dans sa durée complète un événement ou une situation ... renfermé dans une période *q* qui est antérieure au moment de la parole et qui est connue soit pour ce qui est de son début soit intégralement'.<sup>113</sup>

The existence in written French of two narrative tenses alongside each other has led to the elaboration of dual models which seek to differentiate between the appropriate contexts for these tenses. The best known of these is undoubtedly that of Benveniste, elaborated in the nineteen sixties.<sup>114</sup> Benveniste distinguishes between two complementary systems, one of which, *histoire* (also termed *récit historique* or, simply, *récit*) is objective and remote and the other of which, *discours*, is personal and has present relevance. According to Benveniste, the *passé simple* and the pluperfect are the appropriate tenses for *histoire* and the *passé composé*, present and future belong to *discours*, while the imperfect can be found in either category. Benveniste's system, which is attractive in its simplicity, accords well with the tense usage adhered to by authors working in conventional frameworks such as children's fiction and the thriller but is less well adapted to more innovative writing. There are serious flaws inherent in this neat paradigm, in which the subjectivity of *discours* and the objectivity of *histoire* are rigidly separated. Benveniste's description of *histoire*: 'Personne ne parle ici; les événements semblent se raconter eux-mêmes'<sup>115</sup> seems particularly suspect, since all texts, however apparently objective, have an author. His model, then, is insufficiently flexible to account for the innovative tense usage encountered in the undecidable postmodern novel, where the traditional distinction between the objective and the subjective has been eroded.

The dual system propounded more recently by Vuillaume is rather different from that of Benveniste in that it is based solely on French literary texts. Vuillaume distinguishes between two dimensions in fiction: the story itself and its narration, which he defines as primary and secondary fiction. In primary fiction, the use of tenses and temporal adjectives is conventional, while in secondary fiction, there is a mismatch between verb tense and adverb, as in 'Aujourd'hui personne ne lui adressa la parole'.<sup>116</sup> Vuillaume's theory is interesting in that it takes into account the dynamic element inherent in the reading process: 'L'écriture fournit donc un repère unique (immobile) et la lecture une

<sup>113</sup> Henry Schogt, *Le Système verbal du français* (The Hague: Mouton, 1968), p. 40.

<sup>114</sup> I am discounting here consideration of the dual systems proposed by Käte Hamburger in *The Logic of Literature* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1973) (which originally appeared as *Die Logik der Dichtung* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1957) and by Harald Weinreich in *Le Temps* (Paris: Seuil, 1973) (which originally appeared as *Tempus* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1964)) on the grounds that they are not specific to French.

<sup>115</sup> *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, . 241.

<sup>116</sup> From Stendhal, *Le Rouge et le Noir*, pp. 420-1, quoted in Marcel Vuillaume, *Grammaire temporelle des récits* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1990), p. 9.

multiplicité de repères (un repère mobile)'.<sup>117</sup> Unfortunately, Vuillaume confines his examination of literary texts almost exclusively to pre-twentieth century texts, where there is a narrator who is distinct from his/her characters and who is in the habit of addressing his/her reader. He insists that this narrator and reader are separated from the protagonists by 'une limite invisible, mais infranchissable'.<sup>118</sup> Vettters, while largely endorsing Vuillaume's system, disagrees on this point, citing Modiano's *Les Boulevards de Ceinture* as an example of a novel where the narrator becomes a protagonist in the story.<sup>119</sup> Vuillaume's distinction between two temporal levels in fiction, therefore, while of considerable interest, needs further development in the light of the dynamics between author and reader in the contemporary novel.

The dual systems considered above are, then, inadequate to account for the increasing variety and complexity of narrative tense usage to be found in the postmodern French novel. More recently, however, a considerable more sophisticated theory, which recognises the dynamic nature of the French tense system, has been elaborated by Anne Judge. This new theory is based on changes noted by Judge involving the rise of the narrative present and developing past tense usage: as she has observed, 'L'emploi du système reposant sur l'emploi du PrN est remarquablement fréquent à l'heure actuelle, que ce soit en journalisme ou dans d'autres contextes'.<sup>120</sup> while, at the same time, 'l'emploi du passé à l'écrit est en pleine évolution depuis une quinzaine d'années'.<sup>121</sup> In view of these developments, she has proposed a fourfold model, in which two new systems, *le système du présent narratif* and *le système multifocal*, can be seen as encroaching on the territory of *le système du récit* and *le système du discours*, as defined by Benveniste. According to Judge, it is the present rather than the perfect tense which has supplanted the preterite in many cases: 'c'est ce présent simple qui semble prendre la relève du passé simple et non le passé composé'.<sup>122</sup> In rarer cases no single tense predominates, so that multifocality results: 'il s'agit d'un système n'ayant aucun temps-pivot stable'.<sup>123</sup> In her most recent article, 'Le passé simple: un retour aux sources dans le contexte du mélange des

<sup>117</sup> *Grammaire temporelle des récits*, p. 28.

<sup>118</sup> *Grammaire temporelle des récits*, p. 66.

<sup>119</sup> *Temps, aspect et narration*, p. 189.

<sup>120</sup> Anne Judge, 'Écarts entre manuels et réalités: Un problème pour l'enseignement des temps du passé à des étudiants d'un niveau avancé', *Cahiers Chronos* 9 (2002), 135-56, p. 138.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>122</sup> Anne Judge, 'Choix entre le présent narratif et le système multifocal dans le contexte du récit écrit', *Bibliothèque des cahiers de L'Institut de Linguistique de Louvain* 99 (1998), 215-235.

<sup>123</sup> 'Écarts entre manuels et réalités', p. 139.

temps?',<sup>124</sup> Judge has noted a rise in the incidence of this system, already widespread in journalism, in the modern novel.

Judge's identification of these two new narrative options appears to me to be highly significant in the light of tense usage in the *récit indécidable*. As she demonstrates, the narrative present not only lends immediacy and general relevance to a narrative but can also be used alongside other systems to introduce changes of optic (as in the case of Duras's *L'Amant*, where pronoun switching reinforces these shifts).<sup>125</sup> A multifocal system introduces even greater instability: 'il n'y a pas de point de vue unique, mais une multiplicité de points de vue, selon le temps employé. L'optique ressemble à celle d'une caméra qui change de position, d'angle et de profondeur'.<sup>126</sup> These shifting perspectives are much in evidence in the novels of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq, where tense mixing and pronoun switching frequently destabilise the narrative. In examining my chosen authors' use of tenses I shall, therefore, rely heavily on Judge's model, which, to my mind, provides a comprehensive account of French narrative tense usage which is readily applicable to contemporary fiction. I shall consider how Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq avail themselves of the wide choice made possible by the combination of the different systems identified by Judge, identifying instances of multifocality in their writing and highlighting the development over time of their use of narrative tenses in the context of the identity quest.

Having reviewed the major secondary sources on which I shall draw in this thesis, I shall now examine my chosen authors' engagement with the problem of identity. Why are Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq so strongly preoccupied with the identity quest? What is the aim of each author's literary interrogation of identity? Which factors are most important in their exploration of selfhood? These are the questions to which I shall now turn my attention.

<sup>124</sup> To be published in Emmanuelle Labeau, Carl Veters and Patrick Caudal (eds.), cahiers Chronos 16, *Sémantique et diachronie du système verbal français* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007)

<sup>125</sup> 'Choix entre le présent narratif', p. 219.

<sup>126</sup> 'Écarts entre manuels et réalités', p. 139.



## Chapter 1: The Problem of Identity

Une perte progressive de l'identité est l'expérience la plus enviable qu'on puisse connaître. C'est en fait ma seule préoccupation: la possibilité d'être capable de perdre la notion de son identité, d'assister à la dissolution de son identité. C'est pour cette raison que la question de la folie me tente tellement dans mes livres. Aujourd'hui nous souffrons tous de cette perte d'identité, de cet éparpillement de la personnalité. C'est la maladie la plus répandue – il faut l'apprécier dans ce qu'elle a de bon.

*Marguerite Duras<sup>1</sup>*

- Il faut essayer de repartir sur des bases solides, tu comprends?
- Oui.
- Il faut essayer de trouver des racines, comprends-tu?
- Oui.
- On ne peut pas toujours être un homme de nulle part.

*Patrick Modiano  
Livret de famille, p.156.*

Ils finiraient par enterrer mon spectre dans une tombe vide. Et moi, j'aurais trouvé un passage secret et je ressortirais neuve à l'air libre et je changerais d'identité.

*Marie Darrieussecq  
Bref séjour chez les vivants, p. 210.*

The three quotations which head this chapter at once demonstrate the importance of the question of identity for Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq and encapsulate their different perspectives on the search for selfhood. I shall start this chapter by situating the fictional identity quests of my chosen authors in the context of recent developments in the perception of the self and examining the writers' reasons for exploring this issue. Having established broad areas of similarity and difference in their perspectives on identity, I shall isolate three aspects of the search for self for closer examination in order to shed further light on the nature of the postmodern identity quest as exemplified in their fiction.

### Shifting selves

The radical nature of recent developments in the perception of identity has been emphasised by Jean-Claude Kaufmann in his recent sociological study of the subject,

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<sup>1</sup> From Bettina Knapp: 'Interviews avec Marguerite Duras et Gabriel Cousin', *French Review* 44, 1971, 653-659, p. 656.

referred to in the Introduction, which provides a useful theoretical account of the conceptual changes underlying the development of the literary identity quest. The main body of this work is devoted to a perceptive analysis of 'la révolution de l'identité' (p. 76), whose origins Kaufmann situates in the social turmoil of the 1960s, when the view of identity as defined from outside was finally superseded by a model in which the self is perceived as created from within. Above all, Kaufmann stresses the dynamism involved in a process of identity construction which rests on 'un dialogue continu entre présent et passé secrètement mémorisé' (p. 77). Such a performative theory of identity allows for the creation of a number of 'soi possibles' (p. 77), which can be explored imaginatively before being either accepted or rejected. The process of identity creation, however, is not without danger, as the negotiation of selfhood can fail, leading to mental breakdown (p. 194). The identity quest demands a degree of self-marginalisation involving both the rejection of the other (p. 213) and a break with society (p. 272), thus setting the seeker apart. According to Kaufmann, the search for self is not normally voluntary but is dictated by strong imperatives (p. 273). For him, it is closely associated with the artistic process: 'La création artistique représente sans doute le modèle le plus pur de l'inventivité identitaire' (p. 272).

The fiction of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq, whose novels are linked by a strong preoccupation with identity, can be seen to embody Kaufmann's dynamic and open-ended *invention de soi*. All three authors were strongly impelled to write about the self and do so from a marginalised position, oscillating between past and present in their exploration and reshaping of identity. Kaufmann's *soi possibles* can be clearly discerned in their work, in which the boundaries between autobiography and fiction, and reality and fantasy quite frequently become blurred. These multiple and alternative selves are present in Duras's archetypes, Modiano's narrators and surrogates and Darrieussecq's ghosts and reincarnations. Madness and suicide are seen as possible consequences of the failing identity quest.

Why are Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq so intensely concerned with identity? The answer to this question appears to reside in the authors' common experience of marginalisation. All three came from dysfunctional families and were to some extent alienated from mainstream French culture, Duras by virtue of her birth and upbringing in French Indochina, Modiano because of his father's Jewishness and ambivalent role during the Occupation and Darrieussecq because of her Basque roots. Additionally, Duras and Darrieussecq perceived themselves, as women, to be marginalised in a male-dominated society. Marginalisation, then, can be seen to precede their fictional identity quests as well as persisting within them: it is noteworthy that a sense of alienation pervades their novels,

whose central characters retreat to the borders of society in their search for self. Thus Duras's exploration of identity in the context of female sexual desire occurs on the fringes of the conventional world, Modiano, in his search for self, enters the twilight world of the collaborator and the uncertain territory of Jewish identity, and Darrieussecq uses liminal settings to highlight the problem of feminine marginalisation in the couple and the family. It seems that the search for self which is at the heart of the writing of all three authors involves the creation of characters whose underlying sense of insecurity drives them to the borders of society and, at times, beyond these limits.

There are, however, significant differences between my selected writers' treatments of the identity quest. Duras's exploration of the self is considerably more radical than that of Modiano and Darrieussecq, involving the immersion of her protagonists in an extreme experience, often of a sexual nature, which leads, paradoxically, both to a heightened sense of awareness and to a willed renunciation of identity. This emptying of self contrasts markedly with the urgent need of Modiano's empty, diaphanous characters to fill their inner vacuum, caused by rootlessness and poor parenting, with a meaningful sense of identity, an imperative which entails a constant reappraisal of the past. Darrieussecq invokes the spectral and the fantastic in a questioning of selfhood situated at the margins of the quotidian, using the metaphysical to explore the effects of the repression of painful memory on identity formation in the context of the couple and the family.

There is also a significant degree of variation between my chosen authors as to their position with regard to the narrated self. Modiano is closest to his subject, having clearly identified himself as the focus of his literary identity quest: 'J'écris pour savoir qui je suis, pour me trouver une identité'.<sup>2</sup> As there is always some degree of overt equivalence between author and narrator in his fiction, his search for self can be regarded as markedly autofictional. Duras's stance is considerably more variable, as she examines the nature of feminine identity from a standpoint ranging from the semi-autobiographical to the strongly fictionalised, while retaining a high degree of identification with her female protagonists: 'J'écris pour les femmes pour écrire sur moi, sur moi seule à travers les siècles'.<sup>3</sup> It is of interest that her most radical questioning of selfhood occurs through the medium of fictional alter egos such as Lol V. Stein rather than in her more autobiographical texts. Darrieussecq is, of the three writers, the most distanced from her subject, with whom, until recently, she has not explicitly identified herself, while making it clear that the mission at

<sup>2</sup> See Ézine J-L, 'Sur la sellette: Patrick Modiano ou le passé antérieur', *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, 6-12 October 1975, p. 5, quoted in Morris, *Patrick Modiano* (1996), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> *La Vie matérielle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p. 59.

the centre of her writing has its roots in the exploration of the silence at the heart of the family which blighted her childhood: 'Il fallait que je trouve une forme pour dire cet indicible'.<sup>4</sup> In her latest novel, however, this distance is significantly reduced by the introduction of a measure of identification, through *mise en abyme*, between the author and the narrator, both of whom are writing a book entitled *Le Pays*. This would appear to signal a change in direction in which the author, as she herself has indicated,<sup>5</sup> now feels authorised to explore identity in more personal terms.

The fictional identity quests of my chosen authors, then, exhibit both striking similarities and considerable differences. In this chapter I have selected for close scrutiny certain aspects of the search for self which are common to all three writers but which are treated rather differently by each of them. These are the key areas of national identity, gender identity and family identity, which are clearly central to the renegotiation of the self. Although much attention has been paid by critics to some of these topics, notably gender identity in the case of Duras and national identity as regards Modiano,<sup>6</sup> the writers' articulations of the three themes have not previously been compared. By examining the relative prominence of these issues in the novels of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq, I shall illuminate common features of the postmodern identity quest while emphasising the specificity of each writer's engagement with it. Each author's work will be seen to embody in a different way the literary *invention de soi*, its individuality thrown into relief by juxtaposition with the writing of the remaining two writers.

I shall now turn my attention to the three areas identified above, examining the articulations of the issues of national identity, gender identity and family identity in the novels of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq in the context of the underlying sense of marginalisation which pervades the work of all three writers.

## National identity: quest and questioning

The estrangement from French culture experienced by Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq manifests itself in their fiction in the form of a preoccupation with the issues of national identity and rootedness. Typically, their protagonists are depicted as *déracinés* whose

<sup>4</sup> See Alain Nicolas, 'Marie et les cerveaux' *L'Humanité* (13 September 2001), p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> At a talk on her work given at the Maison française in Oxford on 28 March 2006, she expressed this view in response to a question from me regarding the autobiographical content of her novels.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Sharon Willis, *Marguerite Duras: Writing on the Body* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987) and Anderson, *Le Discours féminin de Marguerite Duras* on Duras and gender, and Ora Avni, *D'un Passé l'autre: Aux portes de l'histoire avec Patrick Modiano* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997) and Paul Gellings, *Poésie et mythe dans l'oeuvre de Patrick Modiano: Le fardeau du nomade* (Paris: Lettres Modernes Minard, 2000) on Modiano and national identity.

marginalisation springs in part from insecurity as to national identity and who therefore wish to return to their roots. The theme of the rediscovery of origins is common to all three writers: Duras's best-known work, *L'Amant*, has been described by Armel as a 'quête des origines',<sup>7</sup> Modiano's stated aim in writing his first trilogy is to examine 'la lumière incertaine de mes origines'<sup>8</sup> and Darrieussecq, in her latest novel, *Le Pays*, describes her strongly autobiographical heroine as a 'fugitive qui renoue avec ses racines'.<sup>9</sup> In this return to the roots both a quest for and a questioning of national identity are in evidence: the urge to reconcile Frenchness and foreignness in order to acquire a measure of stability is tempered by the need to reassess the desirability of identifying too closely with a single culture or nation. While these two opposing tendencies are discernible in the fiction of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq, the nature and extent of each author's reappraisal of national identity varies considerably, reflecting the writer's own circumstances. Thus the ambivalence as to nationality exhibited by many of Duras's protagonists mirrors the author's experience of colonialism, in which she was caught between coloniser and colonised, never belonging fully to either group, while Modiano's characters embody the traumatic legacy of the Occupation and the Holocaust. Darrieussecq's identity quest is informed by the more recent phenomenon of globalisation, together with her desire to investigate her Basque heritage. My chosen authors' literary engagements with national identity spring, therefore, from very different historical contexts: the latter days of French Imperialism, the Second World War and its aftermath, and the multiculturalism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

I shall now consider in turn each writer's engagement with national identity in the light of the twin themes of quest and questioning identified above, demonstrating that this topic takes centre stage in Modiano's fiction, is of lesser but increasing importance to Darrieussecq and is a pervasive but background issue for Duras. Modiano's protagonists will be shown to be concerned above all with the acquisition of a French identity in contrast with Darrieussecq's characters who seek to supplement their Frenchness with a regional or global identity and with Duras's heroines, for whom disengagement from national identity is a prelude to the emptying of the self. Because of Modiano's strong preoccupation with national identity, I shall examine his treatment of this issue before that of Duras and Darrieussecq.

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<sup>7</sup> Marguerite Duras et l'autobiographie, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> See J-L Ézine: *Les Écrivains sur la sellette* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> *Le Pays*, p. 58.

Modiano's writing is pervaded by references to national, cultural and social roots as his protagonists seek to reconcile the tension between their French and Jewish origins as a precondition for the integration into society which eludes them. Typically, his narrators are outsiders of Jewish origin who are conducting their identity quest on the fringes of French urban society, surrounded by shady individuals whose exotic names betray foreign connections. Within this general preoccupation with nationality and rootedness there is, however, a discernible progression throughout the writer's novels as he moves from a concern with Jewishness to a more general examination of issues related to *état civil*, in which the individual's sense of anchorage in the community becomes paramount. This quest for French identity eventually takes on a collective dimension, as Modiano's search for self broadens out to include that of a whole generation, the children of those involved with the Vichy regime. In order to explore this development, I shall contrast three of his novels, *La Place de l'étoile*, *Livret de famille* and *Quartier perdu*.

The centrality of the theme of Jewishness, which is implicit in the title of *La Place de l'étoile*, Modiano's first novel, is evident from its outset. The narrator is identified as 'juif' on the first page and there are very frequent references to Jews and Judaism throughout the book, so that Morris has described it as 'an intense examination of Jewish identity'.<sup>10</sup> Although, as noted in the Introduction, Modiano was not strictly speaking Jewish, he felt the need, in the context of the search for his roots through his father, to engage with the latter's ethnic origins. In this novel, therefore, he systematically explores the problem of Jewish identity through a narrator, Raphaël Schlemilovitch, who in turn incarnates a wide variety of Jewish stereotypes such as the token 'bon juif' who collaborates with the French (p.36), the grasping Jew who is only interested in 'l'argent et la luxure' (p.47), the brilliant Jewish student who is 'toujours premier en classe' (p.67) and the criminal Jew who is involved in the white slave trade (p.115). These chameleon-like changes undermine any coherent conception of Jewish identity, an identity which Schlemilovitch alternately embraces and denies and which is itself polarised between the good and the bad Jew, symbolised by Christ and Judas, as Schlemilovitch recognises: 'Il me parle du juif Jésus-Christ. Je lui parle d'un autre juif nommé Judas' (p.104).

*La Place de l'étoile*, then, is a literary *tour de force*, characterised by florid pastiche and a complete lack of *vraisemblance*, in which Modiano presents the reader with a *reduction ad absurdum* of the stereotypes of the Jew. Alongside the prominent issue of *judéité*, however, that of the lack of roots, which would supplant it in Modiano's later fiction, is also present. Schlemilovitch, though born in France, describes himself as

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<sup>10</sup> *Collaboration and Resistance Reviewed*, p. 145.

follows: 'Je ne suis pas un enfant de ce pays. Je n'ai pas connu les grand-mères qui vous préparent des confitures, ni les portraits de famille, ni le catéchisme. Pourtant, je ne cesse de rêver aux enfances provinciales' (pp.17-8). This yearning for roots in the French provinces recurs through the novel, in which the narrator alludes to himself twice as a 'juif apatride' (p.55, p.99), and the figure of the wandering Jew (pp.44, 161) symbolises the rootlessness of the father and son, doomed to a marginal existence because of past transgression.<sup>11</sup> From the fringes of society, Schlemilovitch *père* and *fils* oscillate between accepting their Jewish identity and seeking an assimilation which can never be complete. As Avni has noted,<sup>12</sup> the father's integration problems are mirrored by his changes in dress: his exotic travelling clothes draw attention to his Jewishness (p.66), but he dresses more conventionally when he wants to blend in with the French bourgeoisie (p.69). Similarly Raphaël, upon enrolling at a prestigious French boarding school, donates his exotic wardrobe to his father, declaring: 'Désormais, le béret et la blouse gris mâchefer de la khâgne me protégeront contre moi-même. Je renonce aux Craven et aux Khédive. Je fumerai du tabac gris. Je me suis fait naturalisé français. Me voici définitivement assimilé' (p.71). In spite of this desire for assimilation, however, Raphaël is still perceived as Jewish by his classmates (p.75).

The tension between Frenchness and Jewishness which pervades *La Place de l'étoile* comes to a head in the final section of the novel, where Schlemilovitch goes abroad, first to Nazi Austria and then to Israel. In the former destination, he oscillates between collaborating: 'je suis depuis longtemps le juif officiel du III<sup>e</sup> Reich' (p.151), accepting his Jewishness with the ostracism it entails: 'je suis le frère jumeau du juif Süß' (p.158) and pretending to be French: 'Je suis tourangeau ... Je m'appelle Raphaël de Château-Chinon' (p.153). In the latter destination, Schlemilovitch's repeated insistence on his dual national status ('je suis JUIF français' (p.171)) leads to his imprisonment on a kibbutz which, curiously, resembles a concentration camp, and his subsequent deportation. Modiano here seems to be questioning Israel's rejection of the European heritage which Raphaël sees as part of his identity. In its rejection of the Jewish contribution to European culture: 'Nous ne voulons plus entendre parler de l'esprit critique juif' (p.185), Israel, as portrayed here, is implicitly identified with Auschwitz as a place where the Jewish-European cultural tradition is exterminated. In the final coda to the book, Freud's

<sup>11</sup> For an extended treatment of the theme of the wandering Jew in Modiano's work, see Gellings, *Poésie et mythe dans l'œuvre de Patrick Modiano*.

<sup>12</sup> *D'un passé l'autre*, p. 122.

wholesale denial of Jewish identity: 'LE JUIF N'EXISTE PAS' is also implicitly rejected by Schlemilovitch, whose Jewishness is an essential part of his makeup.

*La Place de l'étoile*, therefore, can be seen as a complex meditation on Jewish identity seen from many different standpoints and over an extensive period of time. At the outset of a literary career in which the search for identity is paramount, Modiano needed first to explore the meaning of his own French-Jewish identity as a writer in the context of the European literary tradition. In subsequent novels, the author's preoccupation with Jewishness recedes, while the theme of *enracinement* comes to the fore. Passing references to *judéité* remain and the topic of the fate of the French Jews resurfaces in *Dora Bruder*, but the narrators of these novels do not stress their Jewish identity in the same way that Schlemilovitch does. Rather, the theme of the tension between Frenchness and Otherness becomes prominent and subsists throughout Modiano's work in the juxtaposition between the almost exclusively French settings of the novels and their cosmopolitan cast of characters. Modiano's most sustained exploration of issues connected with rootedness in the French community occurs in his fifth novel, *Livret de famille*, which Roux has described as an 'Urtext modianien'<sup>13</sup> and to which I shall now turn my attention.

The originality of *Livret de famille* resides in a structure which mirrors its central theme, that of the importance of acquiring a civil identity. As Nettelbeck and Hueston observe,<sup>14</sup> the book's fifteen chapters correspond to the fifteen pages of the French family document from which the book derives its title. Without an *état civil*, one is in danger of becoming a ghost, as Marignan, one of the father substitutes in the novel, points out, looking back wistfully to a time when: 'j'avais encore un état civil et où je n'étais pas un fantôme, comme aujourd'hui' (p.32). The novel consists of a series of reminiscences by a narrator who is identified as 'Patrick Modiano' and who bears an uncanny resemblance to the author without being completely identifiable with him: among other minor discrepancies, the narrator has a sister (p.214) while the author does not. The reminiscences are centred round family and friends, with an emphasis on the rites of passage of birth, marriage and death. As Nettelbeck and Hueston have pointed out, baptism is used as a key symbol of the identity crisis at the heart of the work: 'le baptême – en principe une façon de sacraliser l'identité – est l'image clé du problème d'identité qui est le thème central du livre'.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Figures de l'Occupation*, p. 109.

<sup>14</sup> *Pièces d'identité*, p. 79.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86, authors' italics.



The novel starts with a chapter describing the civil registration of the narrator's daughter, in which the term *état civil* recurs ten times, and ends with a description of the child a year later. At exactly the halfway point in the novel, the narrator alludes to his own baptism and that of his brother, as he revisits the church where the ceremony took place after an interval of more than a quarter of a century. As always in Modiano's work, ambiguity surrounds this event: it was random: 'un baptême de hasard' (p.114), carried out for reasons of safety rather than for any religious motivation. Twenty-five years later, the narrator purports to find revisiting the church reassuring: 'Depuis, bien des choses avaient changé, il y avait eu bien des chagrins, mais c'était tout de même réconfortant d'avoir retrouvé son ancienne paroisse' (115). In the light, however, of Modiano's frequent use of references to buildings which subsist after their occupiers have vanished as symbols of estrangement, this comment appears, as Nettelbeck and Hueston have suggested, to be bitterly ironic.<sup>16</sup>

References to marriage and death also punctuate the novel. Marriage is first alluded to on the second page of the novel, when the narrator consults his *livret de famille* as a prelude to registering his daughter's birth. Inside he finds an extract from his own marriage certificate which, tellingly, is incomplete: 'On avait laissé en blanc les lignes correspondant à: « fils de », pour ne pas entrer dans les méandres de mon état civil. J'ignore en effet où je suis né et quels noms, au juste, portaient mes parents lors de ma naissance' (p.12). He also consults his parents' marriage certificate, which has been stapled inside the booklet, commenting on his father's use of a false name because the ceremony took place during the Occupation. Thus at the outset of the novel the theme of rootlessness is linked to that of his father's troubled past. In the description of the narrator's parents' courtship in Chapter 14, which Roux considers to be a crucial episode in the novel,<sup>17</sup> the same connection is maintained, as the couple, described as 'deux déracinés, sans la moindre attache d'aucune sorte' (p.208), come together in an atmosphere of fear and ever-present danger. Death and disappearance punctuate the novel as key figures from the narrator's past, now absent or dead, are remembered: as well as his parents, who dominate Chapters 4, 5 and 14, his grandmother and uncle are referred to (in Chapters 3 and 11 respectively), together with several surrogate father figures (Chapters 2 and 10). The unexplained death in a café of a Russian tape recorder salesman, with whom the narrator feels an affinity, is the subject of Chapter 6.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>17</sup> *Figures de l'Occupation*, p. 256.

*Livret de famille*, then, is structured round the key events of birth, marriage and death, with an emphasis on the importance of acquiring an *état civil*. As in *La Place de l'étoile*, assimilation is far from straightforward for Modiano's cosmopolitan characters, a situation made clear by the narrator when he reflects on the uncertain origins of his father's friend, Koromindé, which remind him of his own past: 'Et lui? Avait-il été enregistré à un état civil quelconque? Quelle était sa nationalité d'origine? Belge? Allemand? Balte? Plutôt Russe, je crois. Et mon père, avant qu'il ne s'appelât «Jaspaard» et qu'il n'eût ajouté «de Jonghe» à son nom? Et ma mère? Et tous les autres? Et moi?' (p.25). In the face of these complications, the urge to flight can be overwhelming. In Chapter 2, the narrator resists a strong compulsion to emigrate to China: 'C'était l'autre bout du monde. Je me persuadais que là se trouvaient mes racines, mon foyer, mon terroir, toutes ces choses qui me manquaient' (p.41). This temptation to retreat from confronting one's own identity, which recurs as a *leitmotif* throughout Modiano's work, receives its most graphic elucidation in Chapter 9 of this novel, where the narrator's flight to Switzerland becomes symbolic of a retreat into amnesia and stasis, a blocking of the past which Modiano terms «la Suisse du Coeur» (p.118). I shall return to this concept, which is central to the author's identity quest, in Chapter 3. The quest for assimilation, however, prevails over flight: Chapter 11 is devoted to the return to French provincial roots, as the narrator's uncle searches for a house deep in the French countryside. His reasons for so doing are made abundantly clear: like his brother, he is: 'L'homme de nulle part' (p.156) (a phrase which is repeated four times in quick succession), for whom the need for rootedness is paramount: 'Il faut essayer de trouver des racines, comprends-tu?' (p.156).<sup>18</sup> This desire for roots is explicitly linked to the overarching theme of *état civil* when the uncle describes the two brothers in the following terms: 'Est-ce que tu sais que nous n'avons même pas un acte de naissance ... une fiche d'état civil ... comme tout le monde ...hein?' (p.157). The uncle's disappointment is great when the rural retreat he visits turns out to have been rebuilt by the owner in Chinese style as the Moulin Yang Tsé and he angrily rejects this betrayal of its French character and the *dépaysement* it represents: 'Je ne cherche pas à être dépaycé, monsieur, a répondu gravement l'oncle Alex. Dépaycé de quoi, d'ailleurs?' (p.168). As someone who is already alienated from French society by virtue of his origins, he is clearly seeking integration into French culture rather than further estrangement from it.

In contrast to *La Place de l'étoile*, a note of cautious optimism as to the resolution of issues surrounding national identity is discernible in *Livret de famille*. While the narrator

<sup>18</sup> A fuller version of this quotation is provided at the beginning of this chapter.

is still experiencing problems in this sphere, his daughter's easy acquisition of full social recognition seems to indicate future progress: 'elle avait obtenu du premier coup le bien mystérieux qui s'était toujours dérobé devant nous: un état civil' (p. 37). As regards Jewishness, a positive development is also apparent. In the only section of the novel in which this topic is treated directly, Chapter 7, the insistence of the producer of a film for which the narrator has written a screenplay on the addition to the script of a line emphasising the hero's Jewish identity is extremely significant. This phrase: 'On peut être juif et être un as de l'aviation' (p. 209), which is repeated four times, can be seen as a coded assertion by the author that Jewishness and a successful career are compatible. *Livret de famille*, then, while demonstrating Modiano's continuing preoccupation with the theme of national identity and rootedness, indicates that progression in this sphere is possible.

In Modiano's later writing, the exploration of the effect on identity of the tension between inclusion and exclusion remains prominent, as the author continues to examine the situation of protagonists of foreign origins on the fringes of French society. The issue of Jewishness is, on the whole, referred to only obliquely, *Dora Bruder* being the sole work in which Jewish identity reappears as a major theme. The issue of national identity is, however, given a historical dimension as Modiano increasingly equates his personal sense of alienation from society with that of the children of other collaborators who were unable to face the past. A brief examination of *Quartier perdu*, the first sustained evocation of this topic, will illustrate this further development in the author's search for self.

In this highly symbolic work, Modiano uses the metaphor of conflicting national identities to represent the estrangement of the children of the Vichy generation from reality, a theme which he develops in subsequent works, notably *Vestiaire de l'enfance*. *Quartier perdu*, which recounts the return of an acclaimed author of detective fiction to his native Paris after a self-imposed exile of twenty years, is permeated by national and linguistic references. The opening sentence: 'C'est étrange d'entendre parler français' (p. 9) reflects the sense of alienation experienced by the narrator, who has assumed a British name and identity, on arriving in Paris. Surrounded by foreign tourists and multilingual signs, he feels that the city of his birth no longer belongs to him: 'Elle n'était plus la mienne' (p. 12). A meeting with his Japanese editor further compounds this feeling of estrangement. During the meeting, however, the narrator's suppressed French identity suddenly reasserts itself, as he finds himself speaking not only in French but with his original suburban accent: 'j'avais retrouvé, intact, après tant d'années, l'accent de mon

village natal: Boulogne-Billancourt' (p. 16).<sup>19</sup> The remainder of the novel consists of an interrogation of the past in which the identity of the successful British author, Ambrose Guise, is progressively undermined by that of Jean Dekker, the Frenchman who was forced to flee France twenty years previously after becoming involved with a gang of criminals. Clearly, the past cannot be avoided but must be confronted, with attendant consequences for the identities of those concerned. The quest for national identity in *Quartier perdu*, then, acquires a collective resonance as the narrator's return to his roots mirrors a whole generation's re-engagement with its buried past.

In contrast to Modiano, Duras makes sparing reference to national and civil identity in her fictional search for self. Issues of nationality, while rarely overt in her writing, do, however, permeate her work, behind which lies a profound sense of alienation traceable to her upbringing in a French colony which later ceased to exist, causing her to declare: 'Je suis née nulle part'.<sup>20</sup> The negativity of her feelings towards France as a young teenager can be gauged from her description of the adolescent in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* as: 'détestant la France, inconsolable du pays natal et de l'enfance' (p.36), the native country referred to being of course French Indochina. As well as undermining her sense of national identity, Duras's deeply unconventional childhood and adolescence on the margins of a colonial society which she came to perceive as exploitative led her to a wholesale rejection of bourgeois values. Consequently, her feeling of estrangement from France and of difference from the metropolitan French persisted throughout her life and pervades her fiction, in which she frequently alludes to her childhood as setting her apart: 'Je dis que je ne pouvais pas être pareille aux Français après une telle enfance'.<sup>21</sup> Whereas nostalgia for the irretrievably lost world of her childhood suffuses her writing, her attitude towards France is characterised by ambivalence. In spite of her evident hostility towards her mother country, Duras, having rejected her surname, replaced it by the name of her father's village in South-west France, where she had spent two happy childhood years, thus reclaiming the French roots which she repudiates elsewhere.

An illustration of Duras's ambiguous attitude to mainstream French culture is provided by her frequent recourse to foreign protagonists and non-French surnames in her novels. Whereas many of her characters are French, a significant minority are foreign: Rodrigo Paestra in *Dix heures et demie du soir*, for example, is Spanish, while the Captain and his wife in *Emily L.* are English. More ambiguously, a number of characters have

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<sup>19</sup> Revealingly, Modiano was born in this suburb and there are many other points of resemblance between author and narrator in this text.

<sup>20</sup> *La Vie matérielle*, p. 70.

<sup>21</sup> *Emily L.*, p. 53.

names with a foreign ring, though, confusingly, their owners appear to be French speakers. This is particularly in evidence in *Le Ravisement de Lol V. Stein*, in which all the main characters have German- or English-sounding surnames: Stein, Hold, Karl, Beugner, Stretter, Richardson and Bedford, and in *Le Vice-consul*, where most of the small group of Anne-Marie Stretter's acolytes have English names, such as Charles Rossett, Peter Morgan and George Crawn. Why does Duras use this device? It seems to me that by introducing ambiguity into the national identity of her main characters in these novels, the author is distancing herself from French bourgeois values as she moves towards a conception of selfhood which transcends the purely personal and national. By endowing the central protagonists with multiple national identities, Duras emphasises their openness to the Other. Thus two of her major creations, Lol V. Stein and Anne-Marie Stretter are portrayed as having very mixed national backgrounds, while those who surround them are demarcated from the French bourgeoisie by their ambivalent nationality. Lol, though French speaking, has German ancestry: 'son père était d'origine allemande' (p.102) and a surname with Jewish overtones,<sup>22</sup> which links her obliquely to the suffering of the Holocaust. Anne-Marie Stretter is identified as having a French father but an international background: she was brought up in Venice but later lived with a colonial administrator in French Indochina before eloping with the French ambassador.<sup>23</sup> In the eyes of the staid and self-righteous French expatriate community in Calcutta, from whom Anne-Marie Stretter distances herself, her multiculturalism and her transgressive nature are closely connected: 'On dit que ses amants sont anglais, inconnus du milieu des ambassades' (p. 96). By the end of the novel, this gulf is so great that she feels closer to the mad beggar girl, who encapsulates the spirit of India, than she does to her compatriots. Like the beggar, Anne-Marie Stretter will renounce individual identity in favour of fusion with the sea.

The author's choice of settings for her novels also reflects her increasing sense of detachment from traditional French cultural values as she moves towards an engagement with the unknown. Of the three main settings used by Duras: France, foreign countries and imaginary or symbolic locations, the first is prevalent in her earlier works, the second occurs throughout her writing and the third category appears in the second half of her output, demonstrating a shift from the national via the international to the universal. Even in the novels set in France, an element of alienation is present in that the main protagonists

<sup>22</sup> Borgomano (*Marguerite Duras*, pp. 26-8) has commented at some length on this subject, stressing the surname's Jewish consonance and tracing its further appearance in Duras's work, unchanged in *Détruire, dit-elle* and modified in the three short stories entitled 'Aurélia Steiner' which appear in *Le Navire night*, and *Yann Andréa Steiner*. Duras, in *Les Yeux verts* (p. 26), identifies Lol as Jewish.

<sup>23</sup> See *Le Vice-consul*, pp. 98, 110.

are inevitably presented as living on the fringes of society. Thus, for example, the main action of *La Vie tranquille* takes place on an isolated farm while in *Moderato cantabile* Anne Desbaresdes forsakes her comfortable home for the sleazy bars of a seaport. In the novels set outside France, two themes co-exist: wandering and the lure of the East. Boats feature prominently in *Les Petits Chevaux de Tarquinia*, *Le Marin de Gibraltar* and *Emily L.*, the round-the-world voyage alluded to in the latter two novels symbolising Duras's feelings of rootlessness as she circles the globe in her search for self. In the three semi-autobiographical novels and in *Le Vice-consul*, the oriental setting enables Duras to explore the tension between East and West which is at the heart of her writing. The third group of settings mirrors the writer's questioning and ultimate renunciation of the notion of a national and individual self. The distinctly Anglo-Saxon flavour of place names in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* such as T. Beach, U. Bridge and Green Town reinforces the ambiguity already introduced by the naming of the central characters, emphasising Duras's desire to distance herself from her French roots. The community in which the main part of the novel is set, S. Tahla, while unidentifiable, is, however, recognisable as a middle-sized Western town. In *L'Amour*, although the same name is used with a minor spelling change, S. Thala is unrecognisable, having become a apocalyptic setting reduced to the bare essentials: the beach, the hotel, the prison and the bombed casino.<sup>24</sup> This use of symbolic, pared-down locations, in which the sea features prominently, persists in later novels such as *La Maladie de la mort* and *Les Yeux bleus cheveux noirs*, in which the unnamed protagonists, deprived of national identity, have a universal dimension.

Duras's novels, then, are profoundly marked by a questioning of national and personal identity resulting from the clash of cultures to which the author was exposed at an early age. Of my three selected authors, Duras alone lived abroad for a significant period and this lack of a stable anchorage in French life and culture had a far-reaching effect on her literary output. Her idiosyncratic interpretation of female identity to which I shall turn my attention in the next section, with its emphasis on the loss of self, bears the imprint of the Buddhist philosophy to which she was almost certainly exposed during her childhood.<sup>25</sup> From this point of view, her degree of alienation from her mother country can be considered to be greater than that of either Modiano or Darrieussecq.

<sup>24</sup> See *L'Amour*, pp. 9, 18, 32 and 40.

<sup>25</sup> See Micheline Tison-Braun, *Marguerite Duras* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1985), p. 56 and Noëlle Carruggi, *Marguerite Duras: Une expérience intérieure: « le gommage de l'être en faveur du tout »* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995) p. 150, who both suggest that Duras is likely to have absorbed Buddhist ideas while in Indochina.

Like Duras, Darrieussecq was exposed to two different linguistic and cultural backgrounds as a child. Born and brought up in the French Basque country, she spoke Basque before French: she describes it as: 'Ma langue maternelle, oubliée à l'âge de deux ans'.<sup>26</sup> An increasing preoccupation with this dual heritage is evident in her fiction, where the issue of national identity, absent from her first novel, *Truismes*, and evoked only obliquely in her next two novels, *Naissance des fantômes* and *Le Mal de mer*, attains greater prominence in her subsequent works, *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, *White* and *Le Pays*, where Darrieussecq engages directly with the problem of conflicting national identities and a lack of strong roots. Jeanne, in *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, having fled from the French Basque country to South America via Africa to escape from painful family secrets, feels rootless: 'en transit perpétuel' (p.54). Already of mixed ancestry (she describes herself graphically as a 'commode basco-anglo-irlandaise à moulures françaises' (p.275)), she has become further confused as to her identity as a result of her marriage to a South American, who asks her 'si je suis la même dans toutes les langues' (p.95). A similar interrogation of the changing nature of national identity in an increasingly multicultural world is in evidence in *White*, which recounts the romance between Edmée, a bilingual resident of Houston, Texas, and Peter, who acquired Icelandic nationality after being left on the island by his parents in mysterious circumstances during an unspecified war. Both have fled to Antarctica to escape past trauma and they are drawn together by their mixed background and lack of roots. As in *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, language and its links with identity are at issue: we are told of Peter: 'De sa langue maternelle, il ne lui restait rien, absolument rien, la langue qu'il avait sans doute parlée, pourtant, jusqu'à l'âge de six ans, sous un autre prénom' (p.112). Having accorded considerable prominence to the issue of national identity in these two novels, Darrieussecq gives this topic its fullest treatment to date in her most recent novel, *Le Pays*.

The theme of the quest for national identity is implicit in the novel's title. The country in question, an amalgamation of the settings of three of her earlier novels: *Naissance des fantômes*, *Le Mal de mer* and *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, is clearly modelled on the Basque country but has recently gained its independence. This detail enables the reader to situate the text, like that of *Naissance des fantômes* and *White*, in the near future, a temporal device used by Darrieussecq to reinforce the speculative nature of the identity quest. The depiction of the Basque country as a newly independent state in *Le Pays* mirrors the increasing importance of national identity in the protagonist's search for self: the Basque side of her identity is now represented as autonomous rather than

<sup>26</sup> See interview with Miller and Holmes, p. 3.

subservient to a dominant Frenchness. The fledgling state portrayed in this novel is characterised by contradictory elements, being at the same time forward looking, employing state-of-the art technology in its administrative systems and deriving most of its income from a recently constructed nuclear reprocessing plant, and quaintly old fashioned, retaining its 'vieille langue' together with other traditions, so that, for the narrator, 'Ce pays, c'est la Suisse' (p. 80). A hint of exoticism is added to this mixture by the extension of the term 'youanguï', previously used to describe the natives of the futuristic colony in *Naissance des fantômes*, to refer both to the inhabitants of the new state and to their language. These surprising contrasts mirror the tensions inherent in a search for origins conducted in an increasingly multicultural context.

*Le Pays* is informed by the imperative need of the narrator, a writer living in Paris, to return to her roots in order to reconnect with herself: 'Il était temps de rentrer au pays' (p. 17). In the first three fifths of this five-part novel, the issues of national, cultural and linguistic identity are prominent, as can be seen from the titles of the first three subsections: *Le Sol*, *L'État civil* and *La Langue*. Though born in the country to which she is returning, the narrator does not speak its language, so that her attempt to gain dual French and Youanguï nationality is thwarted and she feels deprived of 'un état civil complet' (p. 87). Readjustment to a society which is at once traditional and rapidly changing and in which she is linguistically handicapped proves more difficult than she had anticipated, so, from her marginalised position, she turns to writing in her attempt to 'dire un lieu' (117). Darrieussecq's preoccupation with civil identity in this novel is reminiscent of Modiano's concern with this issue outlined above, while her fictional recreation of the land of her birth recalls Duras's invocation of Indochina in much of her writing. Unlike Duras and Modiano, however, Darrieussecq widens and, to some extent, depersonalises the debate on national identity by interspersing her text with meditations on topics such as globalisation and the fate of minority languages.

In the latter part of *Le Pays*, however, the emphasis of the novel shifts as the geographical quest implicit in the novel's title is seen to mask a search of a different nature. This involves a journey into time rather than space, as the narrator travels back in memory to her childhood. During the course of the novel, the focus of the narrator's identity quest moves gradually from national to family identity, which predominates in the last two subsections of the book: *Les Morts* and *Naissances*. After it has been revealed that the narrator lost a baby brother, snatched from his cradle in mysterious circumstances, and that this loss is intimately connected to the madness of her other adopted brother, the recreation of the lost brother's identity becomes a major preoccupation. Using the futuristic



technology of the state's Maison des Morts, which allows holograms of the dead to be created, the narrator tries in vain to provide the dead child with the identity which has been obliterated by his parents' refusal to discuss his death. When this quest fails, she devotes herself to her writing and to preparing for the birth of her second child, whose name, Épiphanie, symbolises a new beginning. As in *Bref séjour chez les vivants* and *White*, therefore, considerations of national identity and rootedness, though of undoubted significance, are subordinated in *Le Pays* to issues concerning the effects of family trauma on identity formation.

## Gender identity

I shall now turn my attention to gender identity, an issue which is central to the identity quests of Duras and Darrieussecq but peripheral to that of Modiano. To my mind, Modiano's search for self is essentially ungendered: whereas the majority of his protagonists are male, his transposition of the son's quest for the father in his early novels into the daughter's pursuit of the mother in *La Petite Bijou* demonstrates his ability to transcend gender in his exploration of identity. For Duras and Darrieussecq, however, whose identity quests are set within the context of the exploration of the feminine self in the modern world, gender is a major issue. Duras, it must be remembered, embarked on her literary career in a patriarchal society in which, as Fallaize has observed, 'the model of the writer which French women had before them was inescapably male',<sup>27</sup> a situation which did not change significantly until the student revolution of 1968. By concerning herself with women, Duras was writing against the cultural grain, or, to use a metaphor from linguistics, from a marked position. Her novels can therefore be seen as a challenge to the prevailing male hegemony, as she set out to explore in depth the hitherto uncharted waters of female sexual desire. In doing so, she came to abandon the traditional literary style and form associated with the novel in favour of a more instinctual mode of expression which closely reflected her vision of the female experience. Duras's sustained and radical reappraisal of feminine identity can thus be regarded as revolutionary, shedding a new light on previously occluded areas of the female psyche, an achievement which was finally recognised when she was awarded the Prix Goncourt for *L'Amant* in 1984. Her influence on subsequent generations of French women writers has been considerable, as an increasingly large number of them have turned their attention to the exploration of female identity in a world in which the gap between the theoretical acceptance of the equality of

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<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Fallaize, *French Women's Writing. Recent Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1993), p. 3.

the sexes and its implementation is still appreciable. Darrieussecq can be seen to belong to this category, following in Duras's footsteps both in her exploration of women's identity at the margins of society and in her use of experimental language to do so. Like Duras, Darrieussecq adopts an overtly feminine standpoint, opposing patriarchal modes of behaviour which she sees as still prevalent. This gendered approach to the identity quest on the part of Duras and Darrieussecq differs considerably from Modiano's basically unmarked treatment of the search for self.

Two underlying concepts link Duras's and Darrieussecq's literary explorations of the female condition: the *entre-deux* and the *non-dit*. Both writers situate their identity quests on the margins of society, fleeing to the primitive spaces of the sea and the forest, which represent a return to a pre-patriarchal mode of existence. Thus Tison-Braun describes the setting of Duras's *L'Amour* as an 'espace-temps infini' situated 'entre-deux-mondes',<sup>28</sup> while Darrieussecq refers to the intermediate space in which her novels are set as 'un espace de tous les possibles, parfois effrayant, car on peut y oublier d'où l'on vient, s'y perdre'.<sup>29</sup> In this *entre-deux*, cut off from mainstream society, silence prevails, as women, shunning speech, revert to pre-linguistic, pre-logical means of expression. Anderson observes that Duras's *oeuvre* is characterised by 'l'importance du non-dit par rapport au dit',<sup>30</sup> while Darrieussecq's writing is distinguished by an almost complete absence of direct speech, as her female protagonists withdraw into an interior world dominated by shared but unexpressed memories. Both authors make innovative use of language in their attempt to convey the specificity of the female experience.

In spite of these background similarities, however, there are significant differences in focus between the two writers' gendered identity quests. Duras's treatment of the subject is at once highly idiosyncratic and extremely radical, calling into question the notion of identity itself. For her, the path to self-fulfilment involves the renunciation of convention on the part of her normally female protagonists, who then immerse themselves in a highly-charged, usually erotic experience. Paradoxically, the heightened awareness which results from this event leads to a diminution of the subject's sense of individuality, as she becomes caught up in something greater than herself. This ultimately leads to a loss of identity, in which the individual merges with the universe. Female existence is thus conceived of by Duras as cyclical, involving a pattern of flight from society into the self through the transgressive encounter, followed by a letting go of the self as it is absorbed into the

<sup>28</sup> Marguerite Duras, p. 59.

<sup>29</sup> See Antoine de Gaudemar, 'Darrieussecq, du cochon au volatil', *Libération (Livres)*, 26 October 1998, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Le Discours féminin de Marguerite Duras*, p. 60.

greater whole. Darrieussecq's exploration of the female self is, by contrast, more straightforward, consisting of an investigation of feminine identity in the context of the couple and the family. The alienating effects of patriarchy and family secrets on the female subject drive her to the margins, where she renegotiates herself through experimenting with alternative modes of existence.

As we have seen, Duras is almost exclusively preoccupied with women, the exploration of whose nature is central to her work. Although male narrators are not uncommon in her novels (as in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* and *Le Vice-consul*, for instance), the role of the male characters is always subservient to that of the female protagonists, several of whom assume archetypal stature as they recur throughout the *oeuvre*: the *femme fatale*, embodied by Anne-Marie Stretter, the mad beggarwoman and the mother figure. Duras's fascination with the female sexual encounter can be traced to her own precocious sexual experience, first fictionalised in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* and later treated more overtly in *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, after an intervening period in which the author explored this theme in works such as *Moderato cantabile* and *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*. The erotic encounter described in *L'Amant* can be seen as the model for the excessive experience which, for Duras, is a defining moment in the feminine identity quest and to which she returns obsessively in later novels such as *La Maladie de la mort* and *Les Yeux bleus cheveux noirs*.

How is feminine identity perceived and depicted by Duras in her novels? Several different elements make up the author's complex portrayal of the female self: women's essential unknowability, the fundamental incompatibility of men and women, the flight on the part of women from convention into excess and the resulting tendency towards madness and self-destruction. In order to throw into relief the startling originality of the Durassian identity quest, I shall now examine each of these elements in turn.

Underpinning Duras's portrayal of the female self lies the notion of the woman as an enigma and therefore an endless source of fascination: 'N'importe quelle femme est plus mystérieuse qu'un homme. N'importe laquelle'.<sup>31</sup> This mysteriousness arises from Duras's conception of women as inhabiting a pre-cultural space, often embodied in her work by the sea or the forest, in which the symbolic use of language does not apply<sup>32</sup> but is replaced by more instinctive and intuitive means of communication. As Duras developed this Lacanian theory in her writing, she turned away from the relatively conventional style

<sup>31</sup> From Marguerite Duras and Xavière Gauthier, *Les Parleuses* (Paris : Éditions de Monuit, 1974) p. 50, quoted in Anderson, *Le Discours féminin de Marguerite Duras*, p. 11.

<sup>32</sup> See Introduction, p. 8.

of writing characteristic of early novels such as *Les Impudents* and *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* towards a much more expressive but at the same time much less explicit use of language. Hill describes this conception of literature as 'an ecstatic experience at the margins of words and speech'.<sup>33</sup> Duras does not intrude into the inner world of her female characters, but portrays them from outside as creatures of absence and silence who are fundamentally unknowable. Where speech breaks down, perception takes on an increasingly important role, as Skutta has demonstrated in her analysis of the importance of visual clues to behaviour in *Moderato cantabile*.<sup>34</sup> These outer indications are not, however, sufficient to give access to the inner workings of the protagonists' minds: Lol V. Stein is portrayed as 'cet effacement continuuel', 'cette virtualité constante et silencieuse' (p. 33), who is 'inconnaissable' (p. 166). As Borgomano has pointed out,<sup>35</sup> Lol's inability to express herself is paradoxical : the reader cannot decipher a text which is centred round inarticulacy, the 'mot-absence' or 'mot-trou' (p. 48) which Lol is unable to utter. For Borgomano, therefore, it is essential for an understanding of the text to 'quitter la fonction référentielle du langage, celle qui prétend renvoyer aux choses, et laisser jouer la fonction poétique'.<sup>36</sup> Duras, having revealed that 'toutes les femmes de mes livres, quel que soit leur âge, découlent de Lol V. Stein. C'est-à-dire, d'un certain oubli d'elles-mêmes',<sup>37</sup> emphasises her strong affinity with this enigmatic character, describing her 'deuil de ne pas être Lol V. Stein'.<sup>38</sup> This identification may help to explain the incomplete portrait of herself which emerges from her more autobiographical works: she, too, remains essentially mysterious, presenting different *soi possibles* to the reader in response to changing inner imperatives.

As the Durassian heroine retreats into silence, the female body assumes an increasingly important communicative function in the text. Thus the use made by Duras of signs to compensate for the restrictions placed on the role of language due to its loss of denotational force, noted in the previous paragraph, is strongly gendered: Willis has commented on the 'fundamental imbrication of body and language through metonymic and metaphoric displacement' in the author's writing.<sup>39</sup> Bodily images abound, for example, in *Moderato cantabile*, where, as Liman-Tnani has observed, there is a close correspondence between parts of the body: 'mains, seins, cheveux, visage, etc.' and spatial elements: 'parc,

<sup>33</sup> Marguerite Duras, p. 37.

<sup>34</sup> Franciska Skutta, *Aspects de la narration dans les romans de Marguerite Duras* (Debrecen: Kossuth Lajos Tudományegyetem, 1981), pp. 10-44.

<sup>35</sup> Marguerite Duras, pp. 105-8.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>37</sup> See *La Vie matérielle*, p. 36.

<sup>38</sup> 'Marguerite Duras telle qu'elle-même', ARTE, 10 April 2003

<sup>39</sup> Sharon Willis, *Marguerite Duras*, p. 19.

mer, plage, magnolia, grève, etc.’<sup>40</sup> This correlation between the female body and external space is taken a stage further in *Le Vice-consul*, where, according to Limam-Tnani, ‘l’espace fonctionne souvent comme une figuration du corps maternel’.<sup>41</sup> Thus the river Mekong and its tributaries, which symbolise new life and fertility, can be seen as an externalisation of the beggar girl’s womb, while the marshlands which she crosses on her flight to India represent her mental instability and physical disintegration. Symbolic references to the female body, then, are interwoven into Duras’s novels, supplementing the meaning lost through the inarticulacy of the majority of the female protagonists.

For Duras, ‘L’homme et la femme sont irréconciliables’.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, in spite of a strong mutual attraction, encounters between men and women are doomed to failure. The chasm between the sexes is reinforced by the fairly frequent presentation throughout Duras’s writing of women through men’s eyes, in which the essential unknowability of the woman is emphasised: for Jacques Hold, Lol remains profoundly enigmatic, as elusive as water which slips through his hands (p.13) and he has to use his imagination to recreate her story, as is signalled by the repetition of phrases such as ‘j’invente’ (p.56), ‘je vois ceci’ (p.55) and ‘je crois ceci’ (p.71). This presentation of women from an outside point of view has led Selous to describe Duras as ‘a woman writer writing of women as “other”’.<sup>43</sup> The alienation between the sexes which is fundamental to Duras’s *oeuvre* is most forcefully portrayed in the sexual encounter, where, as bodies come together without a corresponding meeting of minds, ‘desire remains an enigma that exceeds meaning’<sup>44</sup> and identity is progressively lost. This loss of identity, with its concomitant risk of madness, is, paradoxically, sought after by Duras, as the quotation which heads this chapter demonstrates. There seem to be distinctly religious overtones here : only by losing oneself can one find oneself. Borgomano comments on the fairly frequent references to God which occur in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* and concludes that the work can be seen as a return to a world before the creation, where God is replaced by ‘un grand tout maternel et féminisé’.<sup>45</sup> Carruggi prefers to emphasise the influence of Buddhist ideas, absorbed during Duras’s childhood in French Indochina, in her discussion of *Le Vice-consul*, a novel

<sup>40</sup> Najet Limam-Tnani, *Roman et cinéma chez Marguerite Duras : Une poétique de la spécularité* (Tunis: Alif – Les Éditions de la Méditerranée, 1996), p. 109.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

<sup>42</sup> *La Vie matérielle*, p. 45.

<sup>43</sup> Trista Selous, ‘Marguerite and the Mountain’ in M. Attack and P. Pownes (eds), *Contemporary French Fiction by Women. Feminist Perspectives* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 84-95 (p. 92).

<sup>44</sup> Hill: *Marguerite Duras*, p. 54.

<sup>45</sup> *Marguerite Duras*, p. 127.

which, according to her, 'proclame la nature illusoire de la notion d'un sujet cohérent et unifié reposant sur le concept de l'identité personnelle'.<sup>46</sup>

The manner in which sexual encounters take place in Duras's work is strikingly unconventional, diverging from bourgeois norms: Anne Desbaresdes forsakes her comfortable middle-class existence as a factory owner's wife to frequent the sleazy bars of a port in the company of a working-class man, while Lol V. Stein, after ten years of faultless conduct as a model housewife, returns to the spot where she was jilted and starts an adulterous relationship there. These sexual encounters also include voyeuristic and erotic elements in which, the power of the word having failed, the look comes into its own: as Borgomano has observed, 'le regard joue un rôle primordial'.<sup>47</sup> This use of the gaze is a fundamental element in Duras's exploration of female identity. While she appears at times to collude with the male objectivisation of women, as in the fetishist image of the teenager in *L'Amant* which punctuates the novel, by appropriating this gaze and redirecting it the author negates this collusion and assumes the powerful position of the male. The reclaiming of the male gaze by the woman is particularly prominent in Duras's depiction of the sexual encounter. The majority of such encounters in her work are triangular in nature, as an observer, who is usually female, witnesses the sexual act, often with the connivence of at least one of the partners: the narrator in *L'Amant* urges her schoolfriend Hélène Lagonelle to have sexual relations with the Chinese lover while she watches, while Lol V. Stein finds fulfilment by observing the lovemaking of Jacques Hold and Tatiana Karl. What is the significance of these shifting triangular situations, so different from the conventional love triangle, which recur throughout Duras's *oeuvre*? The triangle formed by Lol, Jacques and Tatiana seems to be a re-enactment of the triangular situation at the ball involving Lol, Michael Richardson and Anne-Marie Stretter, which in turn can be regarded as a fictional reworking of the author's own relationship with the Chinese lover. In each of these situations, the central female protagonist, involved in an affair threatened by loss, moves to the position of observer in order to experience from outside the phenomenon of merging identities, with which she has become fascinated. By so doing, she is able to identify with the fusion of bodies experienced by her surrogate, so that eventually the identities of observer and observed merge: of Lol we are told that: 'il n'y a plus eu de différence entre elle et Tatiana Karl' (p. 189). As Udris observes, 'sexual desire in Marguerite Duras's fiction needs a third term in order to remain alive and active'.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Marguerite Duras, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> Marguerite Duras, p. 99.

<sup>48</sup> *Welcome Unreason*, p. 63.

Madness recurs as a prominent theme throughout Duras's exploration of the female self. Three differing but related depictions of the loss of reason can be identified in her writing, two of which have their roots in her own experience, while the third represents a further progression by the author towards a radically new interpretation of feminine identity. Firstly, madness can result from frustrated obsession, as in the case of the mother in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, whose unsuccessful struggle against both the power of the sea and the obduracy of a corrupt colonial administration tips her into unreason. Secondly, insanity can be induced by a combination of factors such as rejection, self-neglect and abject poverty, as exemplified by the haunting figure of the beggarwoman who pervades Duras's *oeuvre*. The mother and the beggarwoman recur throughout the author's writing, gaining archetypal status as somewhat different embodiments of madness. They are linked in that each is connected to a primitive, feminine space: the mother has an intimate, if at times conflictual, relationship with the sea while the beggarwoman is closely associated with the forest. They differ, however, in that the mother is a forceful, domineering character whereas the beggarwoman reflects more closely Duras's concept of the silent, enigmatic woman who inhabits a sacred space. The beggarwoman thus conforms to Duras's notion of the witch, in which women abandoned by men revert to a less rational and more mysterious mode of existence in the forest: in the author's words, 'la forêt est aux fous'.<sup>49</sup>

The third exemplification of madness in Duras's writing is that which results from the repeated immersion of the protagonist, both as observer and participant, in the erotic encounter. Here the obsessiveness of the mother and the retreat from identity of the beggarwoman come together. The figure of Lol V. Stein, based on a psychiatric patient encountered by Duras,<sup>50</sup> personifies this type of madness in Duras's fiction: caught up in a perpetual re-enactment of the event which blighted her youth, her jilting by Michael Richardson in favour of Anne-Marie Stretter at the ball at S. Tahla, she becomes the embodiment of sexual desire, gradually losing both her reason and her identity. She is described towards the end of *Le Ravisement de Lol V. Stein* as being unlikely to recover from the trauma of the ball: 'jamais elle ne guérira' (p. 159) and *L'Amour* describes a further stage in the progression of her madness, in which she has retreated into a limbo-like existence, beyond space and time. Lol epitomises the paradox at the centre of the Durassian identity quest, in which, as Best puts it, female sexual desire represents a

<sup>49</sup> *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras*, p. 27.

<sup>50</sup> See Adler, *Marguerite Duras*, p. 387.

'tightrope between self-affirmation and self-destruction'.<sup>51</sup> Although the latter appears to prevail in Lol's case, as madness is portrayed as the inevitable consequence of the pursuit of her obsession, this madness, when envisaged in the context of Duras's cyclical view of the feminine condition, is by no means wholly negative. Rather it can be considered in a more positive light as an emptying of the self which is a necessary prelude to a return to the origins. Thus Udris describes it as a 'vital force' which, by giving access to another mode of being, eventually becomes 'a liberating experience of unreason'.<sup>52</sup> Madness, then, is portrayed by Duras as a particularly female condition which is intimately linked with woman's mystery and unknowability and which is closely bound up with the identity quest.

In summary, Duras's gendered exploration of identity, centred on the female sexual encounter while departing radically from traditional romantic fiction, is both powerful and deeply unconventional. Rather than finding self-fulfilment through union with a male partner, Duras's female protagonists use this encounter as a point of departure into a fundamentally altered mode of existence, in which male values are challenged. By thus reclaiming her feminine roots, albeit at the expense of her sanity, the Durassian heroine arrives at the threshold of rebirth into a new life.

Like Duras, Darrieussecq is almost exclusively concerned with female protagonists, around whom her novels revolve. These female characters, alienated by patriarchal society, flee to liminal spaces dominated by the sea (*Naissance des fantômes*, *Le Mal de mer*) and the forest (*Truismes*), where, on the margins of civilisation, they are more attuned to their inner selves. In order to explore their experience, marked by disappearance and loss, it is necessary to invent a new language: Darrieussecq, like Duras, strips away layers of linguistic convention as she seeks a new voice: 'J'écris pour renouveler la langue, pour fourbir les mots comme on frotte des cuivres – *le bébé, la mère*: entendre un son plus clair'.<sup>53</sup>

There are, however, significant differences between the two authors' explorations of female identity. While Duras takes her exploration of the female self to the point where identity itself dissolves, Darrieussecq uses frontier zones as places where feminine identity can be reassessed so that women can renegotiate their role in the couple and the family. Thus her female protagonists, having become reconnected with themselves, are able to re-enter society on new terms: the heroine of *Naissance des fantômes* embarks on a literary

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<sup>51</sup> *Critical Subjectivities*, p. 13.

<sup>52</sup> *Welcome Unreason*, p. 230.

<sup>53</sup> *Le Bébé*, p. 44 (author's italics).



career, the mother in *Le Mal de mer* renounces her family responsibilities and starts her life afresh in Australia while, by contrast, Edmée, in *White*, commits herself to motherhood and a relationship. Darrieussecq's gendered identity quest is, then, both more firmly rooted in society and less radical in nature than that of Duras. Another difference concerns Darrieussecq's almost exclusive use of female narrators and central characters, the sole exception to date being *White*, where the narrative focus shifts between a male and a female protagonist. Men are less present in her writing than in that of Duras and do not have the same function as observers of female behaviour, though in one novel, *Truismes*, the author skilfully introduces a male perspective on the heroine's character through the narrator's own naïve description of her interaction with a wide variety of men.<sup>54</sup> Unlike Duras, Darrieussecq does not base her female identity quest on the sexual encounter, which is not particularly prominent in her fiction: after *Truismes*, sexual experiences recede into the background in her novels. She does, however, explore feminine identity in the context of woman's relationship with her own body, so that alienation from the self is depicted in terms of metamorphosis into a sow (*Truismes*), while the renegotiation of identity may involve the dissolution of the body and its recreation in another dimension (*Naissance des fantômes*) or physical immersion and ritual cleansing in the maternal womb of the sea (*Le Mal de mer*).

The element of progression which characterises Duras's investigation of female selfhood is lacking in Darrieussecq's writing. Rather than moving gradually towards an emptying of the self, Darrieussecq explores feminine identity through the sequential examination of specific issues of contemporary relevance to the postmodern woman. While refusing to acknowledge the existence of an *écriture féminine*, she admits the possibility of *thèmes féminins*,<sup>55</sup> round which her search for self is structured. Major themes in her novels include the sexual exploitation of women (*Truismes*), the desertion of one partner by the other (*Naissance des fantômes* and *Le Mal de mer*) and the devastating impact of the repression of memory on family unity (*Bref séjour chez les vivants*, *White* and *Le Pays*). I shall now consider in turn Darrieussecq's treatment of each of these issues in the context of the gendered identity quest.

Darrieussecq's first novel, *Truismes*, a fable about a young woman who metamorphoses into a sow, combines a hard-hitting attack on female sexual abjection with an exploration of woman's relation with her body. This complex text, described by Favre

<sup>54</sup> The narrator's artless relation of the incident where: 'Le directeur de la chaîne tenait mon sein droit dans une main, le contrat dans l'autre main' (p.13) enables the reader to see her, through male eyes, as a sex object.

<sup>55</sup> See *Le Bébé*, p. 50.

as 'une énorme plaisanterie qui cache volontairement très mal d'autres profils d'analyses nettement moins drôles, tels que l'exploitation professionnelle et sexuelle d'un personnage dépourvu de tout sens critique',<sup>56</sup> works on several levels, being at once richly comical, heavily ironic and deeply serious. Favre provides a skilful analysis of the literary techniques employed by Darrieussecq to achieve this multilayered effect, emphasising her stylistic originality in introducing a critical distance between the excessively naive narrator and the more sophisticated reader, a device which enables the text to operate at more than one level. The narrator's artless relation of her misfortunes at the hands of men and her grotesque transformation engenders considerable mirth in the reader, who, however, is able to perceive the irony inherent in the central character's witless collusion in her own sexual exploitation and to discern the serious message underlying this picaresque tale.

Darrieussecq's choice of an unintellectual heroine, untouched by feminist ideas, as a vehicle for her attack on female abjection may at first seem surprising. It becomes comprehensible, however, in the light of the author's desire, in this novel, to explore the topical issue of the relationship between a woman and her body in the context of the commodification of the female form. The narrator, a sex worker, is intensely preoccupied with her physical state, having allowed her body to define her as a male plaything. When this body starts to deviate from the required standard, she suffers a severe crisis of identity. The novel is suffused with bodily images as she reacts with increasing bewilderment to the unwelcome manifestations of her changing body : sudden weight gain, excessive bleeding, miscarriage and abortion are preludes to the more alarming symptoms of her mutation into a pig, every stage of which is graphically described. This transformation can thus be construed as a metaphor for the alienation felt by women towards their bodies when life changes jeopardise their conformity to exacting but unrealistic male expectations. The loss of self-worth and marginalisation which may result from such an identity crisis are symbolised here by the narrator's metamorphosis into a pig, hunted down by men and eventually banished to the forest.

The novel's conclusion, however, is ambiguous, reflecting the narrator's ambivalent status as both a victim of abuse and to some extent collusive in her exploitation by men. As Jordan has observed,<sup>57</sup> the heroine's metamorphosis is open to two contrasting explanations : a positive reading in which the narrator is seen as escaping from patriarchal

<sup>56</sup> Isabelle Favre, 'Marie Darrieussecq ou lard de la calorie vide', *Women in French Studies*, 8 (2000), 164-176, p. 167.

<sup>57</sup> Shirley Jordan, 'Saying the Unsayable: Identities in Crisis in the Early Novels of Marie Darrieussecq' in Gill Rye and Michael Worton (eds.), *Women's Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literature in the 1990s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 142-53 (p. 145).

society and coming to terms with her porcine identity in the forest, where she finds her voice, and a more negative reading in which she is condemned to hybridity. In this undecidable narrative, Darrieussecq leaves the reader to decide between these conflicting interpretations.

Darrieussecq's next two novels, *Naissance des fantômes* and *Le Mal de mer*, provide contrasting treatments of the theme of desertion by a partner: in the first case, the wife is abandoned by her husband while, in the second instance, it is the woman who leaves the family home. In both novels, however, separation from the husband is presented as a prerequisite for a reappraisal of identity by the wife.

*Naissance des fantômes*, drawing on the detective story and science fiction, provides a metaphor for estrangement in the couple as the husband's emotional distance from his wife is rendered as physical disappearance: 'Mon mari a disparu' (p.11). This absence engenders a wholesale reassessment of her identity by the abandoned wife, in which she is forced to come to terms with the unsatisfactory nature of a relationship in which she was made to feel subordinate from the outset: her in-laws forced the couple into a grand wedding rather than the 'mariage intime' (p.52) which they had requested and the wife felt further undermined by seven years of marriage with neither children nor a career. For Darrieussecq, a relationship in which the female partner is unable to retain her autonomy is unacceptable: 'l'amour total, l'amour fusion n'existe pas, en dehors des rêveries adolescents (...) aimer, c'est être deux'.<sup>58</sup> The abandoned wife, however, having surrendered her independence to her husband and his family, initially finds it extremely difficult to adjust to his absence and comes near to a mental breakdown, described by the author in the following terms: 'Cette femme, qui ne s'appartient plus, va se défaire, se déliter. Se désagréger. Se décomposer'. Only by painstakingly reconstructing her shattered identity can she redefine herself as 'non plus dépendante de l'homme qu'elle aime, mais autonome et aimante'.<sup>59</sup> In a central episode in the novel, the heroine retreats to the liminal space of the beach, where she confronts her identity crisis, finally finding the courage to reject the 'mâle dominant' (p.67), symbolised by the aggressive male sealions who surround her. Having thus let go of her husband: 'je vomissais tout entière mon mari' (p.66), she is subsequently able to reclaim herself, aided both by her decision to write about her husband's disappearance (p.114) and her liberation from her overprotective mother (p.131). Only then does she feel able to reintegrate her husband into her life when he finally reappears at the end of the novel in ghostly form. Unlike *Truismes*, the ending of

<sup>58</sup> Daniel Mar, 'La femme atomisée', in *Centre France – La Montagne*, 8 March 1998.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

this novel is unambiguous, representing a victory for feminine autonomy over dependence on the male.

The breakdown in marital relations which is the subject of *Le Mal de mer* is altogether more enigmatic: the unnamed wife who has deserted her husband is the most Durassian of Darrieussecq's characters, being portrayed mainly from the outside and through the eyes of others. Here we encounter the unknowable Other, whose motives are never elucidated in this strange tale of flight from an apparently conventional marriage. Liminal spaces are prominent in this novel: it is to the seashore, surrounded by a forest and close to the Spanish border, that the wife goes to reassess her identity. The fluidity of the ocean and the instability of the surrounding landscape, where parts of the cliff have collapsed onto the beach (p.47), seem to mirror the fugitive wife's inner turmoil, as she seeks to reshape her life. However, in contrast with the two previous novels, where the use of a first-person narrator allows access to the heroine's thoughts, this novel preserves the central character's inscrutability by the use of shifting, third-person narration. The undifferentiated use of *elle* for daughter, mother and grandmother gives a powerful sense of solidarity between the successive female generations in the family: there is a sense of unity between the female protagonists against the threatening male figures of the husband and private detective, as they hunt down the errant wife. Ultimately, however, the behaviour of the central character remains mysterious and impenetrable.

The theme of the traumatic effects of repressed memory takes over from that of separation in Darrieussecq's most recent novels. Its connection to the issue of gender is variable, being very strong in *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, where the father is portrayed as responsible for the breakdown of the family in the aftermath of tragedy, weaker in *Le Pays*, where blame is not so clearly apportioned, and absent in *White* which, alone of Darrieussecq's novels, has both a male and a female central protagonist and in which no clear connection between the *non-dit* and the masculine is established. I shall therefore confine my discussion of this theme in the context of gender identity to the first of these three novels, in which the connection between the two topics is very close.

*Bref séjour chez les vivants*, Darrieussecq's most stylistically innovative work to date, develops the exploration of feminine identity as a web in a new context, that of a family riven by tragedy. Using stream-of-consciousness language coupled with a shifting narrative voice, the author examines the relationships between the predominantly female members of a family which, because of the authoritarian behaviour of the father, has become enmeshed in a tissue of family secrets and unresolved tensions. Unable to accept the responsibility for the accidental drowning of his young son, Pierre, whom he left in the

charge of Pierre's two older sisters, the father, who forbids all mention of the tragedy, loses his hold over the family, whom he leaves. A clear indictment of patriarchy can be discerned in this identification of the dominant male figure with the *non-dit* which leads to family breakdown. Dethroned from his dominant position, he is portrayed as 'un dieu perdu' (p. 21) and his disempowerment is symbolised by the family's rejection of his name: the Johnson girls rechristen themselves the 'Johndaughters' (p. 67). After his departure, an atmosphere of solidarity, verging at times on the telepathic, is gradually created between the mother and her three daughters as they try to rebuild their shattered lives. While still inhibited from evoking the drowning directly, they have created a network of shared memories and veiled allusions through which to evoke the terrible event. As in Duras's work, flight and madness beckon: the oldest of the three sisters, Jeanne, takes refuge in South America, while the middle sister, Anne, retreats into a world dominated by fantasies of alien abduction. A powerful instance of feminine intuition is provided through the character of the youngest sister, Nore, who, born after the tragedy which has been concealed from her, is nevertheless subconsciously aware of her dead brother's presence.

Darrieussecq's search for self is, then, primarily undertaken from a gendered position in which the author, rejecting male domination, turns to liminal settings in which to explore themes of relevance to a new generation of women inhabiting a postmodern and increasingly multicultural world.

## Family identity

My chosen authors are linked by the fact that they all experienced difficult relationships with their parents, characterised by physical and emotional absence, especially on the part of the fathers. As Dominique Viart has observed,<sup>60</sup> the desire to explore the issue of *filiation* can be a powerful stimulus to writing: 'Le besoin d'écrire se lie à une interrogation de l'origine et de la *filiation*. Absence sans recours ou présence excessive, les figures paternelles se dérobent au récit et impriment à la langue même une défiguration telle que l'écriture s'en trouve perturbée, et perturbante'. The novels of my selected authors are indeed characterised by quite frequent reference to parental absence and presence: absence in the case of the irretrievably lost father; excessive presence in the case of Duras's dominant mother figure and Modiano's continual preoccupation with his father.

<sup>60</sup> Dominique Viart, 'Filiations littéraires' in Jan Baetens and Dominique Viart (eds), *Écritures contemporaines 2: États du roman contemporain* (Paris: Lettres Modernes Minard, 1999, pp. 115-139), p. 116 (author's italics).

Siblings, as well as parents, occupy an important place in the fiction of all three writers, each of whom was marked by the loss of a brother. Thus a significant degree of similarity as regards the portrayal of the disintegrating family, characterised by absence, loss and non-communication, can be discerned in the novels of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq, which are pervaded by the figures of the absent father, the hostile mother and the lost brother. Happy families are almost totally absent from these novels, which have their roots in family dysfunction: it is significant that Anne, the most disturbed member of the Johnson family in Darrieussecq's *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, quotes the well-known opening lines of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* to illustrate her unhappy situation (p. 138).

In the light of the surprisingly high degree of consensus as to the nature of parental and sibling relationships in my selected authors' fiction, I shall adopt a synthetic approach in this section, examining in turn the significance for the identity quest of the absent father, the hostile mother and the lost brother. In doing so, I shall explore the tension in each writer's work between the acceptance of the reality of the dysfunctional family and the need to create more satisfactory alternatives. Thus, alongside the depiction of harsh parents and fraternal loss, idealised and fantasised reworking of family identity will emerge at times, peopled by surrogate figures and reincarnations of the dead brother. I shall now turn my attention to the role of the father in my chosen authors' fiction.

### **The absent father**

The portrayal of the father in the novels of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq is largely negative, reflecting the authors' uneasy relations with their distant or absent fathers. For Modiano, the breakdown in the relationship with the same-sex parent was devastating, so that the quest for the absent father dominates his early work. Duras and Darrieussecq, more preoccupied in their novels with mother-daughter relations, accord less prominence to the father. I shall therefore examine Modiano's search for identity through the father before discussing the more restricted role allotted to this figure by the two women authors.

The father's omnipresence in Modiano's writing stems from the author's pressing need to fill the void left in his life by his own father's emotional and physical absence. The fact that Modiano published his first novel in 1968, the year in which this remote and forbidding figure deserted the family, indicates a desire to compensate for this loss: as Roux has observed, Modiano needed to provide himself with 'une filiation et d'une identité qu'il ne possède pas'.<sup>61</sup> The quest for the lost father is urgent, as identification with the

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<sup>61</sup> *Figures de l'Occupation*, p. 10.

missing parent is perceived by Modiano's subject as a means of filling his inner emptiness.<sup>62</sup> This search dominates the first trilogy, *La Place de l'étoile*, *La Ronde de nuit* and *Les Boulevards de ceinture*, novels in which Modiano steeped himself in the period of the Occupation in an attempt to understand the elusive figure of his father, a collaborating Jew. Having grappled with the question of his confused national identity through the protean character of Raphaël Schlemilovitch in *La Place de l'étoile*, Modiano moves on in his two subsequent novels to explore somewhat different aspects of the father-son relationship, which I shall now examine.

In *La Ronde de nuit*, Modiano adopts a bold strategy, operating a fusion between the narrator and the father so that, as Nettelbeck and Hueston observe, 'le narrateur est le père ou, plus précisément, est ce que l'imagination écorchée de Modiano projette comme le jeune homme que son père a pu être'.<sup>63</sup> Not having access to a clear account of his father's dubious conduct during the Occupation, Modiano resorts to his imagination to fill the gap, putting himself in the position of a weak character during those troubled times and providing a vivid account of the factors leading to treachery. Despite having the angelic appearance of an 'enfant de chœur' (p. 55), the narrator, as he himself realises only too clearly, lacks the moral fibre necessary to resist evil: 'Décidément, je n'étais pas fait pour vivre dans une époque aussi ténébreuse' (p. 80). His flawed interior, characterised by unreliability, will eventually lead him to become 'un traître exemplaire' (p. 23). A vacillating and shallow character with a 'cœur de midinette' (p. 65), he has neither the qualities of a hero nor a villain: 'Pas assez de forces d'âme pour me ranger du côté des héros. Trop de nonchalance et de distraction pour faire un vrai salaud' (p. 41). Already engaged in dubious financial activities before the war in spite of his intention of being 'un fils irréprochable' (pp. 86-7), the extra pressures of the Occupation turn him, almost against his will, into a double agent: 'Indic, pillard, assassin peut-être. Je n'étais pas plus méchant qu'un autre. J'ai suivi le mouvement, voilà tout' (p. 124). Here, as in *Lacombe Lucien*, for which he wrote the filmscript, Modiano, while not exonerating treachery, demonstrates with unflinching clarity how easy it is for a weak character to be drawn into serious wrongdoing, especially in a period of moral degeneration such as the Occupation. Unable to face the consequences of his actions, the narrator retreats into a fantasy world in which he redeems himself by becoming the guardian angel of two unlikely and vulnerable characters, Coco Lacour, an old man, and Esmeralda, a young girl. When forced to admit

<sup>62</sup> For a discussion of the subject as a ghost, see Daniel Parrochia: *Ontologie fantôme: Essai sur l'œuvre de Patrick Modiano* (Paris: Encre Marine, 1996), p.22.

<sup>63</sup> *Pièces d'identité*, p. 33 (authors' italics).

at the end of the novel that they do not exist, his already fragile identity finally disintegrates: 'Coco Lacour et Esmeralda n'existaient pas (...) A ce jeu-là, on finit par se perdre soi-même. De toute façon, je n'ai jamais su qui j'étais' (pp. 152-3). *La Ronde de nuit*, then, while successful as an exercise in empathy, fails to solve the identity quest, as identification with the father draws the narrator into a moral vacuum from which he cannot escape.

A somewhat different tactic is used in *Les Boulevards de ceinture*, where father and son are clearly differentiated but where Modiano shifts the narrator close to the father figure both in time and in milieu, representing him as the father's 'ange gardien' (p. 111), whose self-appointed role is to rescue this weak character from the unsavoury bunch of collaborators who surround him. Distinguished from his fellow conspirators by his Jewishness, the father, Chalva Deyckecaire, is at their mercy, 'une bête traquée' (p. 51), whom his son is determined to protect at all costs: 'Nous marcherons jusqu'au bout sur du sable mouvant [...] Quoiqu'il arrive, je partagerai votre sort' (p. 155). The son's pity for 'une âme vagabonde et fragile' (p. 94) underlies this altruism, which even the father's attempt to murder him by pushing him under a tube train, related halfway through the novel, cannot shake. At the end of the novel, he finally achieves solidarity with his father by killing his anti-Semitic assailant, Lestandi, affirming, as he does so, 'C'EST MON PÈRE' (p. 170, author's capitalisation). There is a strange symmetry between these two acts of violence, which involves, as Laurent has observed,<sup>64</sup> a curious inversion of the normal pattern in which the son kills the father. On the contrary, it is the son, as Morris points out, who fulfils 'the (traditionally paternal) role of family-maker-cum-victim', while the father adopts 'that (classically reserved for the son) of family-breaker-cum-murderer'.<sup>65</sup> The son's redemptive act, however, has limited force: whereas it neutralises the father's hostility, it cannot compensate for a non-existent relationship. The narrator is eventually forced to admit that he has learnt nothing about this elusive man: 'Qui êtes-vous? J'ai beau vous avoir suivi pendant des jours et des jours, je ne sais rien de vous' (p. 182) and to acknowledge that: 'Un père et un fils n'ont sans doute pas grand-chose à se dire' (p. 180). Thus, through this novel, described by Nettelbeck and Hueston as 'une mise en cause fondamentale de la notion même qu'une identité quelconque puisse se constituer à partir de l'héritage paternel',<sup>66</sup> Modiano re-evaluates the possibility of discovering selfhood through the father.

<sup>64</sup> *L'Oeuvre de Patrick Modiano*, p. 88.

<sup>65</sup> *Patrick Modiano* (1996), p. 35.

<sup>66</sup> *Pièces d'identité*, p. 45.



After *Les Boulevards de ceinture*, the author broadens his identity quest, moving away from the scrutiny of paternal relations in the period of the Occupation to explore the wider theme of the post-war generation's search for self in the context of the Vichy syndrome.<sup>67</sup> The fusion of *La Ronde de nuit* gives way to fission, as the father's deficient character is supplemented by a large number of surrogates, such as Marignan in *Livret de famille*, Jean D. in *Remise de peine* and Francis Jansen in *Chien de printemps*. Whereas the ghost of the father continues to haunt his work, Modiano's narrator no longer seeks to remould himself in the paternal image but distances himself from a parent who is increasingly depicted as abusive. Thus, in the author's most recent fictional work, *Accident nocturne*, the nebulous figure of the father whose 'disparition dans le brouillard' (p. 116) pervades the novel, is blamed in no uncertain terms for the son's predicament: 'Je n'ai jamais été un fils [...] Pas d'études. Pas de parents. Pas de milieu social' (p. 117). The quest for the absent father, then, while triggering Modiano's fictional search for self, does not lead to its resolution.

The scarcity of father figures in Duras's fiction can be seen to be related to the fact that her father, whom she professed hardly to have known,<sup>68</sup> died when she was only seven after a period of absence from the family home due to illness. This negative experience of fatherhood appears to lie behind the rejection of patriarchy which underlies her writing. As with so much of Duras's life, however, there is considerable ambiguity in her relationship with her father: while rejecting his family name, Donnadiou, she replaced it by the name of his village in South-western France in what Blot-Labarrère terms a 'Retour au père par pseudonyme interposé'.<sup>69</sup> The father, then, though conspicuously absent from his daughter's life and rarely depicted in her fiction, is nevertheless bound up in her identity quest.

While mentions of the father are few in the semi-autobiographical novels,<sup>70</sup> a father figure is present in several other novels, notably Duras's first published novel, *Les Impudents*, *L'Après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas*, written some twenty years later, and a late novel, *La Pluie d'été*. In these novels, Duras, in opposition to Modiano, reinvents the father in the light of her developing concept of selfhood. A comparison between these three incarnations of the father at different stages in Duras's literary career will illuminate

<sup>67</sup> As defined by Henri Rouso in *Le Syndrome de Vichy de 1944 à nos jours*.

<sup>68</sup> See Adler, *Marguerite Duras*, p. 14, who reports Duras's insistence, against the facts, that she was only four when he died.

<sup>69</sup> *Marguerite Duras*, p. 43.

<sup>70</sup> The father is portrayed as already dead at the beginning of *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* (p. 19) and is referred to only in passing in *L'Amant* (pp. 41-2) and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (pp. 24, 34, 117, 123).

this progressive redefinition of identity, in which she both liberates herself from the domination of the father and recreates him in a more sympathetic guise.

The father in *Les Impudents* evokes little but contempt. A teacher like Duras's own father, he is absent from the main part of the story, so that the family is dominated, as the author's was, by the figures of the mother and her elder son, whom the mother has spoilt and who bends her to his will. It is significant that Monsieur Taneran is portrayed as the stepfather of Maud, the headstrong daughter, as in her depiction of this father figure some of Duras's own unease with the notion of fatherhood can be felt. An ineffectual character, he is dismissively referred to by his surname by the rest of the family who scorn him: 'Quant à Taneran, il s'arrangera bien sans nous' (p. 28). He only remains in the 'citadelle d'indifférence' (p. 31) of the family home because of the creature comforts provided by his wife's cooking, together with a touching hope that she will return to the marital bed which she has long since abandoned. Awkward and silent, he has relinquished his role as head of the family, a symbolic detachment from the family which is actualised in the main part of the narrative, where he elects to remain in Paris while the remaining members of the family move to the Southwest of France. On their return at the end of the novel, Taneran is still alive, but has been reduced to a mere shadow, who snores in the background as the family unravels. His wife bemoans his lack of involvement in the family: 'une mère est toujours aveugle, surtout lorsqu'elle n'est pas soutenue par la ferme attitude d'un père' (p. 243), describing herself as 'la mère de trois orphelins' (p. 244).

The eponymous hero of *L'Après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas* contrasts significantly with this negative caricature, marking a transition in Duras's attitude to the father, whom she now treats with empathy. *L'Après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas* traces a seventy-eight-year-old man's relationship with his beautiful seventeen-year-old daughter, Valérie, the fruit of a late marriage. As the father loses his mental and physical powers, his daughter banishes him to a forest retreat high above the seaside village where they had come to live: 'Il est enfermé dans la forêt par Valérie – son enfant' (p. 60). From here he is reduced to observing his daughter's movements in the village below, which he can see from the verandah of his house. He watches, isolated and almost reduced to silence, as she moves away from him into a world of sexual adventure. Though powerless, the old man has a certain godlike quality as he surveys the world beneath from his lofty perch. The exaggerated age gap between him and his daughter (whose name identifies her with one of Duras's central characters, Lol V. Stein, and, by extension, with the author herself) symbolises the distance which lay between the author and her dead father. More significantly, the surrounding of the impotent male figure by the powerful Durassian

feminine symbols of the sea, the forest and madness (embodied by the village girl, who visits Monsieur Andesmas) suggests the triumph of the intuitive, maternal, precultural world over the male-dominated, linguistically-based social order. In her portrayal of Monsieur Andesmas, which is considerably more complex and subtle than that of Monsieur Taneran, Duras is at once distancing herself from patriarchy and recreating imaginatively the last days of an old man looking back on his 'immense vie éteinte et glacée' (p. 94). The solitary figure of the abandoned father who has lost all power over his wayward daughter elicits considerable sympathy from the reader but at the same time can be seen as encapsulating a rejection of male authority by the author.

Having exorcised the ghost of her father, Duras, many years later, is able to create a more favourable image of the father figure. In a late work, *La Pluie d'été*, she uncharacteristically depicts a united and mutually supportive husband and wife, thus contradicting her stated view of the couple as incompatible<sup>71</sup> and counterbalancing the generally pessimistic picture of family relations which persists throughout her writing. The spouses in this novel have much in common: they are both well read (p. 9), go drinking together (p.52), share the same jokes (p. 76) and are concerned about their highly intelligent son's refusal to attend school (pp. 61-9). This happy union, however, takes place on the margins of society: both Emilio and his wife are immigrants who are dependent on benefits due to the husband's unemployment (p. 71). Though self-educated to quite a high level, they allow their seven children to run wild and frequently abandon them to go on drinking bouts, thus incurring the wrath of their neighbours (p. 72). In spite of this, the family is happy: 'ils étaient les plus heureux des habitants de Vitry' (p. 70). Clearly there is both comic irony and fantasy in this depiction of family harmony. Duras makes skilful use of the contrast between the family's marginalised status and the happiness of its members to attack bourgeois institutions such as the French education system. More significantly, by referring to the parents by a variety of different names (the husband is both Emilio and Enrico while his wife is variously known as Natasha, Hanka, Eugenia, Ginetta and Emilia), Duras undermines their identity, emphasising the element of wish fulfilment in a novel which represents a fantasised reworking of her own childhood experience. Nevertheless, *La Pluie d'été* demonstrates Duras's ability, at the end of her career, to envisage the possibility of a loving father figure.

Darrieussecq's depiction of the father is uncompromisingly negative: almost completely absent from three of her novels, he is portrayed in the remainder of her fiction

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<sup>71</sup> See *La Vie matérielle*, p. 45.

in a most unfavourable light. I shall now consider the picture of the father which emerges from *Le Mal de mer*, *Bref séjour chez les vivants* and *Le Pays*.

In *Le Mal de mer*, the father of the little girl who is abducted by her mother remains a shadowy presence. His relentless, methodical quest for the fugitives, however, marks him out as a male hunter stalking his prey. The reader's sympathies are therefore drawn towards the hunted females even though the reason for the wife's flight and final abandonment of her child are never elucidated. This polarisation between male and female is developed more strongly in *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, Darrieussecq's most extended treatment of the theme of paternal authority. In this novel, the handsome but autocratic father, John Johnson, abuses his power by leaving his two young daughters in charge of their baby brother and then holding them responsible for his tragic death by drowning while in their care. This failure is compounded by his subsequent refusal to allow proper discussion of this tragedy ('THEY WERE NOT GOING TO DISCUSS THAT IN FRONT OF THE CHILDREN' (p. 224, author's capitalisation)), so that he comes to represent the *non-dit* at the heart of family breakdown. Rejected by the female members of the family, his departure signals the demise of 'La Famille Tant-Mieux' (p. 225). The disempowered father is replaced by a new stepfather who is his antithesis. Disfigured, like the dead child at the heart of the story, Momo is a companion rather than a figure of authority, an embodiment of the 'new man'. A benign and non-threatening presence, he obligingly mows the grass (p. 33), builds a terrace for the house (p. 116) and takes tango lessons with his wife (p. 154). Momo represents the only acceptable male presence which the abandoned wife can reincorporate into a life which has been blighted as a consequence of masculine authoritarianism: his disfigurement at once creates solidarity with the memory of the dead child and can be seen to symbolise castration. His stepchildren, however, are unable to accept this new incarnation of fatherhood.

In Darrieussecq's most recent novel, *Le Pays*, the portrait of the father turns to caricature: here the father, unable to talk about his infant son's untimely death except by repeating the impersonal phrase '« On nous l'a pris »' (p. 105), is presented as a figure of ridicule. Whereas his wife was able to use the tragedy constructively, leaving him to become a world-famous monumental mason, her husband, previously a captain of industry, 'le roi de B. Nord' (p. 276), has gambled away his fortune and is now totally dependent on his millionaire ex-wife. In his daughter's eyes, he is a figure of fun, who has regressed to a monkey-like state: 'Mon père bonobo détournait le regard, oscillait des hanches, s'accroupit, s'empara d'un bout de bois et l'ausculta' (p. 277). As such, he is presented as an endangered species, on the verge of extinction. Deprived of money, he has lost all

semblance of power and authority: 'Il était devenu un homme en moins, un homme manquant' (p. 278). In this swingeing attack on male domination, the father, as a result of his failure to communicate, has been reduced to a caricatural but non-threatening presence, a situation in which the identity of the female members of the family is free to blossom. As in the novels of Duras, the disempowering of the male seems to be a necessary precondition for the successful pursuit of the female identity quest.

### The hostile mother

As might be expected, the figure of the mother is considerably more prominent in the novels of the two female authors than in those of Modiano. I shall therefore compare and contrast the portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship in their fiction before turning to Modiano's slighter treatment of the subject. Duras and Darrieussecq both emphasise the ambivalence of the mother-daughter relationship and portray the mother as having an archetypal dimension: rarely named by either writer, the mother at times embodies universal and mythical qualities. In Modiano's work, the mother has no such archetypal status but appears with increasing frequency in his later novels, belying his assertion that 'ma mère est absente de mon oeuvre'.<sup>72</sup> In the novels of all three writers, the prevailing emotion characterising mother-child relationships is hostility, as the mother's domination is challenged by the child's quest for self-realisation.

Just as Modiano was impelled to write by the search for his father, so Duras's literary career has its roots in her troubled relationship with her mother. The latter's strong opposition to her daughter's literary vocation appears to have stimulated Duras to start writing: as Armel has observed, 'l'acte d'écrire est d'abord un moyen de s'opposer à la mère'.<sup>73</sup> In her novels, Duras frequently returns to the subject of her childhood and adolescence, reassessing the mother-daughter relationship. Thus, as Blot-Labarrère points out, for Duras, 'l'écriture est définitivement liée à la mère'.<sup>74</sup>

Duras's fictional portrayal of the mother, which reflects her own stormy maternal relations, has both a positive and a negative dimension. A strong character, this figure is depicted both as a courageous fighter, tenacious to the point of madness in her pursuit of justice, and as a domineering tyrant, imposing her will on those around her. The balance between these contrasting but complementary aspects of the mother's personality shifts in

<sup>72</sup> See Jean-Claude Texier, 'Rencontre avec un jeune romancier: Patrick Modiano', *La Croix*, 9-10 November 1969, p. 8..

<sup>73</sup> *Marguerite Duras et l'autobiographie*, p. 40.

<sup>74</sup> *Marguerite Duras*, p. 58.

the course of Duras's writing, as the author repositions herself in relation to this figure. A brief comparison of Duras's treatment of the mother in two of the semi-autobiographical works, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* and *L'Amant* will reveal how the negative displaces the positive as the daughter reclaims her identity.

*Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, Duras's third novel, was intended by the author as a tribute to her mother's strength of character. The mother, on whom the narrative is centred, appears in a positive light as a fighter against colonial corruption. Referred to simply as 'la mère' throughout the novel, she has archetypal status as the incarnation of generations of women struggling against male oppression. Her character is, however, flawed: her 'incroyable naïveté' (p. 24) has impelled her to take on not only the colonial authorities but also the full might of the Pacific ocean, as she vainly builds dams to protect her uncultivable land. Stubborn and determined, she is unable to learn from the failure of this enterprise, which only reinforces her obstinacy: 'Elle s'acharnait. Elle s'était toujours acharnée, d'un acharnement curieux, qui augmentait en raison direct du nombre de ses échecs.' (p. 155) Her children, aware that her actions result from intractable and misplaced optimism, treat her with pity rather than blame: 'On ne pouvait pas lui en vouloir. Elle avait aimé démesurément la vie et c'est son espérance infatigable, incurable, qui en avait fait ce qu'elle était devenue, une désespérée de l'espoir même.' (p. 124). Unfortunately, this admirable if excessive behaviour in the public sphere is counterbalanced in the domain of the family, where she is portrayed as tyrannical, demanding submission from her adolescent children: 'Il fallait lui obéir' (p. 96). Given to violence, she beats her daughter mercilessly and has such a hold over her children that they realise that she will destroy them if they fail to escape from this 'monstre dévastateur' (p. 160).

Duras's nuanced but forthright depiction of the mother in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, which combines the positive and the negative, was repudiated by Madame Donnadieu, causing a rift between mother and daughter, so that Duras felt unable to confront the painful subject of her adolescent relations with her mother for over a quarter of a century. In the intervening period, she turned to a more strongly fictionalised exploration of the feminine condition, developing further female archetypes, such as the figures of Anne-Marie Stretter and the mad beggarwoman. The unresolved tension between the good and the bad mother is, however, apparent in *Le Vice-consul*, where two contrasting mothers are briefly depicted: a hostile figure who rejects her daughter, the beggar girl, and a nurturing figure who accepts the girl's baby. After the death of her immediate family, in the changed literary climate of the 1980s, marked by significant

developments in the nature of autobiographical writing, Duras finally revisited and substantially reworked the story of her childhood and adolescence.

In *L'Amant*, the daughter, freed at last from the mother's domination, places herself centre stage and is able to engage with the formerly taboo subject of the awakening of her adolescent sexuality. In this novel, in which the identity imposed by the mother is strongly contested, the portrayal of the maternal figure is predominantly negative. While still feeling admiration for 'l'immensité de la candeur de notre mère' (p. 77) and pity for 'la mère écorchée vive de la misère' (p. 59), the narrator increasingly distances herself from her family. The mother's attempt to impose a spurious unity on this 'Famille de voyous blancs' (p. 109), symbolised by the image of the family photograph, comes in for heavy criticism, as does the lack of communication in this dysfunctional family in which normal conventions are not observed: 'Jamais bonjour, bonsoir, bonne année. Jamais parler. Jamais besoin de parler. Tout reste, muet, loin. C'est une famille en pierre, pétrifiée dans une épaisseur sans accès aucun. Chaque jour nous essayons de nous tuer, de tuer' (p. 69).

In this situation, separation from the mother becomes imperative. The balance of power between mother and daughter alters when the latter, increasingly aware of her own sexual attraction, realises that: 'La mère n'a pas connu la jouissance.' (p. 50) As Best has observed, the girl's sexual initiation at once distances her from her mother and gives her power over her, as, in a role reversal, the mother is identified with the lover whose affection the teenager does not fully reciprocate.<sup>75</sup> By invoking the image of the mother at the heart of the scene in which the union between the teenager and the Chinese lover is consummated and by naming her at this juncture, the author reinforces her own identification with both mother and lover.<sup>76</sup> The introduction of the topic of separation and estrangement into the conversation with the lover: 'Je lui dis que de ma mère une fois je me séparerai, que même pour ma mère je n'aurai plus d'amour' (p. 58) introduces a sense of equivalence between the lover and the mother, separation from both of whom is seen as inevitable. A further development occurs later in the novel, when the narrator, on the eve of separation from her mother, sees her in a new light: 'Il y a eu tout à coup, là, près de moi, une personne assise à la place de ma mère, elle n'était pas ma mère, elle avait son aspect, mais jamais elle n'avait été ma mère.' Suddenly her mother has become the Other, with whom she can no longer identify: 'justement cette identité qui n'était pas remplaçable

<sup>75</sup> *Critical Subjectivities*, pp. 130-1.

<sup>76</sup> See *L'Amant*, pp. 58-9. On p. 59, the mother is referred to by her maiden name as 'Marie Legrand de Roubaix', the only direct naming in the semi-autobiographical works, though there is a reference to her first husband, the improbably named 'Monsieur Obscur' on p. 113. On pp. 122-3 the mother is again invoked during a sexual encounter with the Chinese lover.

par aucune autre avait disparu' (p. 105). As the mother's power decreases, two other figures appear in the text, Anne-Marie Stretter (pp. 109-11) and the mad beggarwoman (pp. 106-8), who can be seen as alternative mother figures, comparable to the surrogate fathers who people Modiano's novels.

In *L'Amant*, then, Duras has progressed from the fictionalised retelling of the mother's story of *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, in which her positive side is emphasised, to a renegotiation of difficult mother-daughter relations, in which the daughter disempowers the controlling mother and thus affirm her own identity.

The importance of the mother figure in the negotiation of selfhood, clearly demonstrated in Duras's semi-autobiographical texts, also emerges from a study of Darrieussecq's novels. As in Duras's fiction, there is a degree of ambivalence in the depiction of the mother-daughter relationship, though this is more polarised in Darrieussecq's writing, where the portrayal of the mother, less overtly autobiographical than in Duras's *oeuvre*, varies considerably from novel to novel. The mother is present to a varying degree in each of Darrieussecq's six novels and her relations with her daughter range from antagonism to complicity. Three mother figures can be identified: the hostile mother, the ambivalent mother and the nurturing mother, each of which I shall now examine.

The hostile mother appears in three of Darrieussecq's novels, *Truismes*, *Naissance des fantômes* and *White*. In *Truismes* and *White*, her presence is menacing but peripheral. The mother in *Truismes*, having disappeared from her daughter's life, re-enters it at the end of the novel as a malign presence whom the daughter is obliged to kill in self-preservation. In *White*, an even bleaker figure is evoked, the infanticidal mother from whom Esmée has fled to the Antarctic. Both these depictions have mythical overtones, suggesting, in the first case, the wicked stepmother of the fairytale and, in the second instance, evoking the figure of Medea.

The portrayal of the hostile mother in *Naissance des fantômes* is more substantial but less mythically based: the daughter turns to her mother for support after the unaccountable disappearance of her husband, with which the novel opens. The depiction in this work of the domineering mother who impedes her daughter's self-development is reminiscent of *L'Amant*. The mother's presence is so strong that it reduces her daughter to a state of childlike dependence: 'Au bout d'une heure et demie avec elle, j'avais six ans' (p. 126). Self-absorbed, the mother recounts her own trivia instead of listening sympathetically to her daughter's problems (p. 123). The only advice she feels able to give her daughter is categorical, reflecting her authoritarian character: 'il était temps,



maintenant, de refaire ma vie' (p. 127). This lack of empathy results in alienation, as the daughter fails to bond with her: 'je ne la reconnaissais pas' (p. 127). As the maternal image fades, she tries to hold on to the essence of her mother, but is forced to realise that she has nothing in common with this woman who, before her marriage, subjected her to constant change, so that her life became 'une affolante dentelle à trous-trous' (p. 128), and whose energy she perceives as malign. The strength of the narrator's feelings become clear when, at the party given before the mother sets off for a new life abroad, the daughter mentally transforms herself into a shark and fantasises about killing the guests (p. 136). The narrator's separation from such a mother would seem, as in Duras's case, a necessary prerequisite for self-discovery and indeed it is not till the mother's departure is imminent that the daughter is able to reintegrate her husband's ghostly presence into her life and to envisage recreating herself through writing.

Ambiguity characterises mother-daughter relations in *Le Mal de mer* and *Le Pays*. There are distinctly Durassian overtones in the figure of the mother in the former novel, a non-communicative character who, without warning, removes her daughter from the family home to the primitive spaces of 'la mer et la forêt' (p. 41). As Shirley Jordan has pointed out,<sup>77</sup> this can be seen as an initiation rite, albeit one in which the normal element of preparation is lacking: the child voices her regret at having been unable to ready herself for her first encounter with the ocean: 'Elle aurait aimé apprendre, se préparer' (p. 19). The mother, therefore, seems to have provided her daughter with an experience of real value, despite being unable to communicate with her on a day-to-day basis: significantly, there is no dialogue in this novel of silence and absence. Paradoxically, however, having initiated her, the mother abandons the child for a new life in Australia, leaving mother-daughter relations in this novel profoundly ambiguous: as she waits for her flight to Sydney, the mother is still thinking about her child: 'La petite doit dormir à l'heure qu'il est' (p. 136). In a mythical reference, she is referred to as a Penelope in reverse, who flees rather than awaiting her husband's return: 'cette Pénélope-là n'attendait ni un homme, ni un retour' (p. 132). Clearly, escape from the empire of men takes precedence over her role as a mother. Here, then, the theme of the necessary separation between mother and daughter, evoked, as we have seen, in *L'Amant*, is presented in reverse: in this novel, the mother's identity quest is given priority over that of the daughter, whose presence impedes her mother's self-development. This would appear to represent an implied criticism by Darrieussecq of the heavy burden placed on the modern mother by the excessive dependence of her offspring, as a reading of the title in which *mer* is understood as its homophone *mère* suggests.

<sup>77</sup> See Shirley Jordan, 'Saying the unsayable', p. 152.

In Darrieussecq's latest novel, *Le Pays*, the topic of mother-daughter jealousy is broached. The mother in this novel, as opposed to the author's other maternal figures, is named, suggesting a move away from an archetypal depiction of the mother. The naming practice in this novel reinforces the separation between mother and daughter, both of whom wish to assert their identities: the mother, estranged from her husband, has reverted to her maiden name, Miren Zabal (p. 92), while the daughter, Marie Rivière, though married, has not taken her husband's name (p. 263). Returning to the country of her birth in order to write a novel, the daughter visits her mother, who, in contrast to her father, has surmounted the tragedy of the loss of a baby by channelling her grief productively, becoming a famous sculptor of funerary monuments. Later in the novel, the daughter's latent hostility towards her mother is revealed. On a visit to London, she intends to visit her mother's exhibition at the Tate Gallery, thus paying homage to a parent who has treated her with consideration: 'Ma mère avait lu mon premier livre, gentiment et sans commentaire: je pouvais bien lui rendre la pareille en visitant son exposition' (pp. 236-7). In the event, she is overcome by jealousy and finds an excuse not to visit the gallery: 'Des gens extraordinairement nombreux faisaient la queue devant la Tate. Je levai la tête, la façade disparaissait sous une affiche: MIREN ZABAL, RECENT WORKS. *Marie Rivière*, chantonnai-je, *Marie Rivière*, best young writer ever' (p. 242, author's capitals and italics). In this novel, then, her most autobiographical to date, Darrieussecq evokes the rivalry aroused by career success on the part of both mother and daughter, a topical theme in an era when feminine aspirations are increasingly being realised.

An alternative portrayal of mother-daughter relations, in which hostility is completely absent, is presented in *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, a novel in which the mother plays a major role and attains archetypal status. This unnamed character, having stayed with her children after her husband's departure, endeavours to hold together a family which has been shattered by tragedy: 'tous les matins la même histoire: reconstituer la famille' (p. 15). As the full extent of her loss, involving the death of a son by drowning, is gradually revealed, her behaviour elicits considerable sympathy from the reader as she immerses herself in trivial household tasks in a vain attempt to keep the ghosts of the past at bay: 'Qu'est-ce que je vais faire maintenant que les lits sont faits' (p. 64). After the initial shock of the tragedy, in which she was confined to bed and contemplated suicide, she resisted the temptation to flee abroad (in contrast to the mother from *Le Mal de mer*), concentrating on rebuilding the family. Pursued by concerns for their welfare, she structures her life around maintaining contact with her daughters, even though she realises that they are strangers to her: 'trois filles et trois mystères' (p. 33). In spite of the

occasional desire to abandon her children: 'parfois on a envie de les abandonner au bord de l'autoroute' (p. 198), she persists in what she perceives to be her maternal duty, while at the same time building a new relationship with a non-threatening partner. Her underlying sadness, the archetypal sorrow of the mother for her dead child, is invoked by the reiteration of a refrain from a popular song: '*ma mère dites-moi pourquoi vous êtes triste*' (pp. 43, 89). The poignancy of the mother's position is reinforced by the ironic, deferred ending of the novel, where further tragedy awaits her. This positive depiction of the nurturing mother, so different from the more hostile or distant figure of Darrieussecq's other novels, can be seen as a fantasised reworking of a relationship usually depicted by the author as conflictual. As such, it comes close to Duras's idealised portrayal of the mother in *La Pluie d'été*, in which a degree of wish-fulfilment can be discerned.

The mother, absent from Modiano's early fiction, is increasingly present in his later novels, a development which culminates in *La Petite Bijou* (2001), where the daughter's search for the mother replaces the son's earlier quest for the father. Like the father, the mother in Modiano's novels is clearly drawn from life: she is invariably depicted as a struggling minor actress who puts her career before her family. The relationship with the mother, too, is overwhelmingly negative: she is portrayed as a hostile and neglectful parent who frequently abandons her children to the care of others.

The theme of the uncaring mother is evoked in *Remise de peine*, where this figure is conspicuous by her absence, having abandoned her children to go on a theatrical tour. They are looked after by a series of female substitutes, who are depicted as fairy godmothers while the absent parent assumes the role of the wicked stepmother. In *Vestiaire de l'enfance*, the mother appears as a selfish actress, whose unfeeling attitude towards her son is echoed by her repetition of a line from the play which she is rehearsing: '« Bonjour, famille, unie dans la douleur!... »' (p. 74). *La Petite Bijou*, however, is the only novel devoted entirely to the mother, so I shall now consider in some detail Modiano's exploration of maternal relations in this recent and therefore little-studied work.

Laurent's assertions that: 'Aussi étonnant que cela paraisse, la quête de la mère n'est d'ailleurs pas un thème de nos romans'<sup>78</sup> and that, when writing about the mother, 'Modiano ne fabule absolument pas sur elle'<sup>79</sup> are refuted by this novel, where the character of the mother is imaginatively recreated. There is a striking similarity between aspects of *Les Boulevards de ceinture* and this work, which can be seen as its feminine

<sup>78</sup> *L'Oeuvre de Patrick Modiano*, p. 116.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

counterpart. As in the earlier novel, the narrator of *La Petite Bijou* rediscovers her parent after a significant time gap (12 years in this case), recognises her from photographic evidence (p. 9), knows nothing about her (p. 10) and is not acknowledged by her mother, who remains impassive (p. 11) and indifferent to her (p. 16). It is also suggested that the mother, like the father, has in fact been engaged in clandestine activities when her daughter had been led to believe that she had died abroad: 'On ne meurt pas au Maroc. On continue de vivre une vie clandestine, après sa vie' (p. 17).

As in *Les Boulevards de ceinture*, the use of false names by both parent and child reinforces the inauthenticity of the relationship between them. The mother has a bewildering array of names: while her real name appears to be Suzanne Cardères (p. 85), she has adopted the stage name of 'la comtesse Sonia O'Daüyé' (p. 63) and is nicknamed 'La Boche' (p. 64). The figure of the yellow-coated woman recognised on the underground train, who may or may not be the narrator's mother, is identified as having the surname 'Boré' (p. 27), similar though not identical to that of the mother's putative brother, 'Bori' (p. 28), and is referred to as 'Trompe-la-Mort' (p. 63) by her landlady, reinforcing the impression that she is in fact a reincarnation of the mother. It is in the naming of the child, however, that the development of the mother-child relationship becomes clear, as the mother is implicated in having imposed an unwanted identity on her daughter. Three phases of the daughter's childhood are alluded to, in each of which she is referred to in a different way. In the initial phase, in which she is sent to boarding school, she is not yet identified by the name by which she would later be known: 'je n'étais pas encore la Petite Bijou' (p. 114) and there are only two oblique, retrospective allusions to her first name, Thérèse (pp. 112, 126). This stage of her life, when her mother showed no interest in her, is presented as a sort of pre-existence in which the child is rarely named and is waiting for recognition: 'J'attends toujours et personne ne vient me chercher' (p. 81). When, however, at the age of seven, her mother at last takes notice of her daughter, an unwanted identity is imposed on the child as she is forced to take part in a film with her mother and becomes known by the name of the character she plays, la Petite Bijou. The daughter strongly resists this identification, feeling that she is being treated as 'un faux enfant prodige, une pauvre petite bête de cirque' (p. 82) by her ambitious mother. The film's title, *Le Carrefour des archers* (p. 94), appears to reinforce the bewilderment of the little girl caught in the crossfire of adult ambitions. It is only after the filming, when the mother loses interest in her daughter and packs her off to stay with friends with a label round her neck, that she is finally identified by her given name, Thérèse Cardères, which is written on the label: 'Heureusement que je portais mon étiquette, sinon je me serais perdue parmi tous ces gens.'

J'aurais oublié mon nom' (p. 123). This is the only instance in the novel where the narrator's full name is given, suggesting that she could not become her true self until freed from the false identity imposed on her by her ambitious parent. Thus there is a progression in this novel from embryonic identity through false identity to authentic identity, suggesting that, while parental recognition is a necessary component in identity formation, a selfish parent may impede the child's search for self through the imposition of an alien identity. This concept links the novel to *L'Amant* and *Naissance des fantômes*, in which the mother also tries to impose her identity on her daughter.

What is the outcome of the daughter's quest for her mother which is at the heart of this novel? As in *Les Boulevards de ceinture*, it seems that the lost parent cannot be replaced: 'La chose perdue ne se retrouvera jamais' (pp. 29, 58). The mother must be symbolically killed: 'IL FALLAIT TUER LA BOCHE POUR VENGER LE CHIEN'<sup>80</sup> (p. 116, author's capitalisation) or left behind: 'Oui, le temps était venu de COUPER LES PONTS' (p. 77). The narrator opts for the latter course, as, aided by the chemist, a surrogate mother described as 'le même âge que ma mère' (p. 87), she decides to leave Paris. Although this departure is postponed because of the narrator's attempted suicide, the last words of the novel suggest that she has finally liberated herself from the past: 'c'était le début de la vie' (p. 154).

*La Petite Bijou*, then, seems to be an imaginary reworking of the mother-daughter relationship, as *Les Boulevards de ceinture* was of father-son relations. Like the earlier novel, it appears to represent an attempt by the author to come to terms with the quest for the parent in order to be able to move forward and the conclusion to be drawn from it seems identical: the past cannot be retrieved, so the search for self must be extended beyond it.

In conclusion, separation from the hostile mother who seeks to dominate her offspring, imposing an alien identity on them, seems to be an essential part of the search for self, although Duras and Darrieussecq also recognise the nurturing role associated with the archetypal mother.

### **The lost brother**

The themes of loss, disappearance and death inspired by the cataclysmic events of the Holocaust pervade the writing of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq, as is the case with many modern novelists. These themes, however, have a more personal resonance for my

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<sup>80</sup> The dog can be seen to symbolise both the daughter and a putative sibling: see following section.

three chosen authors, each of whom lost a brother, a loss which underlies their fictional identity quests. Duras, the youngest of three children, felt herself to be treated less favourably than her two elder brothers, by whom she was bullied. However, after the death of the younger of the two brothers in early adulthood, she came to idolise him. Modiano, the elder of two brothers, felt protective towards his younger brother, Rudy, and was devastated by his death in 1957, in circumstances which were never fully explained to him. Both authors make quite frequent allusion to the lost brother in their fiction. Darrieussecq, though considerably more reticent about her family background, has revealed that she lost a brother at a tender age and has explored the subject of the accidental death of a child in two of her novels, *Bref séjour chez les vivants* and *Le Pays*. In this section, I argue that the search for the lost brother is crucial to the identity quests of my chosen authors, all of whom seek to recreate the missing sibling.

Significantly, Duras's first novel appeared shortly after the death of her brother, suggesting that this untimely event influenced her decision to start writing. Her strong and polarised feelings towards her two brothers, the elder of whom she detested and the younger of whom she adored, are in evidence in much of her fiction. It is noteworthy, however, that whereas the depiction of the older brother remains constant throughout Duras's writing, there is considerable development in the portrayal of the younger brother as the writer retrospectively repositions herself in relation to the lost sibling. In the earlier novels, the brothers are portrayed as quite similar: Henri in *Les Impudents* is described as a 'jeune garçon pervers' (p. 31), who, by running wild, is following in his older brother's footsteps. Similarly, Joseph, in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, shares many of the characteristics of the older brother, who is absent from this novel, being strong willed (p. 143), violent (p. 248) and given to excessive behaviour (p. 70). Suzanne's feelings for this brother are ambivalent: she both loves (p. 124) and hates him (p. 169). Brother and sister share the same 'insolence heureuse' (p. 85) and collude in their treatment of Suzanne's suitor but the sister is strongly resentful of her brother's power over their mother, which allows him to escape from the family when she is obliged to remain behind. Thus the portrait of Joseph in this novel is not completely favourable: though praised for his 'virilité' and 'vérité' (p. 249), together with his prowess as an intrepid hunter (p. 299), Joseph has some negative character traits, as he himself admits when he describes himself as 'un homme cruel' (p. 240).

After the death of her brother, Duras's fictional representation of him changes considerably. In *L'Amant*, in which both brothers are equally present, the angelisation of the younger brother contrasts starkly with the demonisation of the older brother. This is

evident in Duras's use of names and epithets: whereas the older brother remains unnamed throughout the novel, the younger brother is referred to tenderly as 'le petit frère' and named on one occasion (p. 98). The macho element of the younger brother's character is consistently played down in *L'Amant*, in which this brother, in contrast to his older sibling, is portrayed as having no hold over his sister (p. 67) and as protecting her from the violence of the mother and the older brother (p. 74). The love which his sister feels for him is irrationally strong: 'Cet amour insensé que je lui porte reste pour moi un insondable mystère' (p. 129) and has maternal overtones, as she alludes to him as 'mon petit frère, mon enfant' (p. 13). Sexual and mystical feelings also come into play, as her identification with her brother becomes a bodily communion: 'le corps de mon petit frère était le mien aussi' (p. 128).

The sanctification of the younger brother is taken still further in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, in which he assumes a more important role than the older brother. In this work he is identified as a lover as well as a child: 'mon fiancé, Paulo, mon enfant' (p. 30) and his body is compared to that of the Chinese lover (p. 95). More radically, the narrator admits to incest with the younger brother in this novel (p. 209), a confession which seems to accord with Duras's own assertion that: 'Le petit frère était le Chinois finalement. C'est ça mon secret'.<sup>81</sup> Alongside this fusion between the lost brother and the lover, there is a curious *dédoublement* of the character of the younger brother in this late work in the character of Thanh, to whom the book is dedicated. A local child, saved by the narrator's mother (p. 34), he is devoted to the narrator, whom he describes as 'ma soeur', refusing, however, to sleep with her when she suggests this (p. 182). His gentle presence echoes Paulo's saintliness, as well as strengthening the link with Indochina, where Duras's brother died.

Duras, then, clearly reshapes her lost brother in accordance with the personal mythmaking which is central to her exploration of selfhood. Modiano's relationship to his lost sibling is somewhat different: rarely named and never clearly described, this brother is perceived as absence rather than presence, a symbol of the precariousness of human existence and the irrevocability of the passage of time. As Laurent observes, some of Modiano's most prominent themes can be seen to be linked to the impact of his brother's death: 'nous sommes convaincus que la disparition du frère a ébranlé durement l'homme: obsession de la mort, conscience que tout est éphémère, angoisse de la solitude, nostalgie ...'.<sup>82</sup> Haunted by loss and disappearance, the empty narrator feels as if an integral part of

<sup>81</sup> From an interview on TF1, 'Au-delà des pages' June-July 1988, quoted in Blot-Labarrère, p. 181.

<sup>82</sup> *L'Oeuvre de Patrick Modiano*, p. 102.

himself is missing: on accidentally losing a shoe in *Accident nocturne*, he comments that 'aussi loin que je remontais dans mes souvenirs, j'avais toujours marché avec une seule chaussure' (p. 21).

In *Remise de peine*, the only work in which the author confronts the loss of his brother directly, the twinlike complicity underlying this sense of incompleteness is explored. The two brothers, left to their own devices by their absent parents, are rarely out of each other's company. Patoche and his unnamed younger brother are frequently referred to as 'nous' and 'mon frère et moi' as the brothers explore the village where they live and its surroundings, fantasising about visiting the castle at dead of night. A fairytale atmosphere envelops the novel in which the boys' identities merge: there is little to distinguish them except that Patoche, being the older of the two, has already started school (p. 28). It is also revealed, in one of the few personal touches in the novel, that they prefer different colours (p. 86). Thus the younger brother does not emerge as a character in his own right but as a sort of ghost companion, whose death, alluded to once in the novel when the focus shifts to the future, has forever changed his brother's life: 'J'avais perdu mon frère. Le fil avait été brisé. Un fil de la Vierge. Il ne restait rien de tout ça ...' (p. 102).

Apart from this nostalgic evocation of a lost childhood, Modiano only touches on the subject of his brother in passing, perhaps because of the painful emotions awakened by such memories. Two emotions prevail in these brief references: an element of survivor's guilt and a strong desire to halt the passage of time. In *Fleurs de ruine*, the narrator, on revisiting an area of Paris which he has avoided because of the memories associated with it, recalls playing with his brother in a square close to twin statues of Cain and Abel (p. 90). As they played, time seemed to stand still, a sensation which he wishes to recapture: 'Les aiguilles de l'horloge ne bougeaient pas. Elles indiquaient pour toujours cinq heures et demie. Ces aiguilles immobiles nous enveloppent d'un silence profond et apaisant. Il suffit de rester dans l'allée et plus rien ne changera jamais' (p. 91). Thus, although the allusions to the brother are few, they are highly emotionally charged. Overt references to him cease after *Fleurs de ruine*, but the final words of *Chien de printemps*, a short novel concerned with the quest for a vanished photographer, Jansen, reveal the importance of the brother in the author's search for self: 'un frère, un double est mort à notre place à une date et dans un lieu inconnus et son ombre finit par se confondre avec nous' (p. 121).

Whereas the relatively few references to Rudy in the main body of Modiano's fiction have been commented on extensively, a recent development in the author's writing has not so far received significant attention. This concerns reference by substitution to the lost brother. There clearly seems to be an element of this in *Dora Bruder*, where the title



can be read as a coded reference to the adored but lost brother, whose memory, like that of the young Holocaust victim, deserves to be perpetuated. In the author's two most recent novels, a trace reference to the brother appears to persist in the form of a dog. While this dog can be identified from *Éphéméride*, an autobiographical fragment published in 2002, as a childhood pet which was run over (p. 33), the significant role played by this animal in *La Petite Bijou* and *Accident nocturne* seems to point to a further identification with the lost brother. The dog in *La Petite Bijou* shares the narrator's bedroom (p. 113) before being taken by the mother to the Bois de Boulogne, where it is lost. This loss of the pet (or death, as, significantly, it is referred to on one occasion (p. 79)) has a devastating and permanent effect on the narrator: 'Un soir de novembre, un chien s'était perdu dans ce bois et cela me tourmenterait jusqu'à la fin de ma vie' (p. 111). In an echo of the references to the lost brother in *Fleurs de ruine*, she avoids revisiting the area where she walked the dog: 'Ce que j'appréhendais, surtout, c'était de longer le bois, près du jardin d'Acclimatation, dans cette zone où s'était perdu le chien' (p. 139). By comparing herself, in the role imposed on her by the mother, to a circus dog, she reinforces her identification with the brother substitute and against the mother: 'Il ne lui avait pas suffi d'avoir perdu un chien dans le bois de Boulogne. Il lui en fallait un autre qu'elle puisse exhiber comme un bijou' (p. 121). The reference to the desire to kill the mother to avenge the dog, alluded to in the previous section, can thus be considered to embrace both the narrator and the dog/brother. In the *dédoublement* of the narrator's family provided by the Valadiers, a dysfunctional couple with a small daughter, whom the narrator looks after, a dog is also mentioned when the parents refuse to buy one for the child. The narrator's comment to the child: 'c'était dangereux, ces histoires de chien' (p. 111) seems significant here, encapsulating the pain of her own loss.

In *Accident nocturne*, Modiano's most recent novel, a dog again occupies a prominent position, although the link with the lost sibling is less overt than in the previous novel. The accident from which the book takes its title reminds the narrator of an earlier episode in which a dog was run over (p. 10). In a curious comparison, the narrator equates the loss of the dog in the first instance with the loss of one of his shoes in the more recent accident, suggesting that both represent a missing part of himself. As the narrator sets out to elucidate the mysterious circumstances of this accident, a dog comes to his aid, acting as a guide (pp. 120-3). There is a faint but unmistakable echo of *Remise de peine* in the heavy emphasis laid on the colour of the car which the author is seeking, 'couleur vert d'eau' (p. 26), reminiscent of the brother's 'auto tamponneuse de couleur vert pâle' (p. 92) in the earlier novel. Finally, the dog's death is pinpointed as the moment at which the narrator

became aware of his lack of roots (pp. 139-40). These coded allusions seem to point to a continued preoccupation on the author's part with the loss of his brother. While avoiding overt reference to his brother's death in his most recent novels, the author's use of the substitute figure of the dog allows him to approach this painful topic more obliquely, a necessary step in the rebuilding of a fractured identity.

Darrieussecq treats the subject of the death of a brother more directly than Modiano. Shocked by the phenomenon of childhood death, which she describes as 'l'ultime scandale',<sup>83</sup> she draws on her own experience to explore the nefarious effects on family identity of the *non-dit* surrounding this subject in two of her novels, *Bref séjour chez les vivants* and *Le Pays*. In both of these novels, the narrative is centred on the gradual revelation of the accidental death of a small boy, which is not discussed, leading to family disintegration and the madness of a sibling. There are, however, significant differences, in that the former paints a bleaker picture of the effects of traumatic death on identity than the latter. A comparison of them will reveal developments in Darrieussecq's family-based identity quest.

The events of *Bref séjour chez les vivants* take place over a twenty-four hour period and are narrated from the shifting viewpoints of several family members. Not until the halfway point in the novel does it become clear that the day in question is the anniversary, some 25 years later, of the discovery of the body of the drowned three-year-old brother/son of the protagonists. Little mention is made of the events of this tragedy in a narrative set entirely within the minds of the protagonists, who are unable to discuss this painful subject, but the horrific nature of the accident is skilfully built up by an accumulation of graphic detail, culminating in the description of the child's washed-up, unrecognisable corpse (p. 196). The dead boy, Pierre, is referred to fairly infrequently and is angelised as a blond wonderchild who could speak Basque and build extravagant constructions from lego (pp. 92-3).

Two themes, both connected with the *non-dit*, are explored by Darrieussecq in this narrative: revenge and reincarnation. In the first case, Darrieussecq draws on both Classical mythology and science fiction to depict how the spirit of the dead child takes revenge on the two sisters who were implicated in his death, having been deputed to watch over him when he drowned. The younger sister, Ann, is driven to madness, perceiving herself to be recruited by Pierre into a world inhabited by aliens, while her older sibling, Jeanne, is lured to her death, also by drowning, by his malign presence. Thus a metaphysical dimension is added to the identity crisis suffered by the sisters, in which the child is depicted as an evil

<sup>83</sup> See François Busnel and Thierry Gandillot, 'Rencontre', *L'Express* (23 August 2001), p. 12.

presence. The implication here seems to be that the failure to confront past trauma will lead to self-destruction. This bleak message is offset to some extent by the theme of reincarnation, in which Nore, the sister born after her brother's death and unaware of his existence, is depicted as perpetuating him: 'elle lui ressemblait, à en faire silence dans la famille, à en être consternés: la réincarnation de Pierre assise sagement au fond du minibus' (p. 163). This resemblance has a psychological as well as a genetic dimension: though unaware on a conscious level of her brother's existence, Nore perceives herself intuitively as having had a previous life which ended violently: 'Dans une vie antérieure j'ai eu une mort violente très certainement' (p. 103). Her fascination with the sea, together with her preoccupation with the topic of the loss and recovery of memory, link her to the lost sibling, a connection which is reinforced when, revisiting the house where he lived, she becomes aware of his ghostly presence: 'on l'a appelée. Elle a entendu son nom, Nore' (p. 284). Darrieussecq's depiction of the bond between the apparently insouciant teenager and the lost brother is very powerful, demonstrating how family identity manifests itself in spite of non-communication between family members. *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, then, is at once a strong indictment of the destructive effects of the *non-dit* and an assertion that the past cannot be concealed.

In *Le Pays*, written four years later, Darrieussecq's message is more muted: the child's death is less harrowing and its consequences less severe. As noted earlier, the narrator's return to her origins is gradually transformed into a quest for the lost brother. In this case, the baby was snatched from his pram at a very early age, so that nothing remains of him but his name, Paul Rivière. In this narrative, told by a single voice, there is polarisation along gender lines as to the effects of the *non-dit*. The male members of the family suffer badly from the consequences of non-communication whereas the women are shown to be more resilient: the dead baby's mad stepbrother and financially and physically ruined father contrast sharply with the mother and sister, who have used past tragedy to build successful careers. An element of reincarnation subsists in this tale in the portrayal of the schizophrenic brother, Pablo, adopted by the parents after Paul's death. This surrogate child, who comes to resemble his adopted parents (p. 215), is an acceptable substitute for the lost baby until madness destroys his identity, when the presence of the lost child reasserts itself: 'Quand Pablo est devenu fou, c'est là seulement que ce frère, qui n'avait pas vécu, s'est mis à exister' (p. 104). The theme of revenge is played down in this novel, where Pablo's madness seems to spring from an instinctive refusal to take on an imposed identity rather than the malign influence of the dead child. By reinventing himself

as 'le fils du Général de Gaulle' (p. 26), he refuses to conform to his parents' expectations of him, retreating instead into a world which they cannot enter.

The latter part of the novel is devoted to the narrator's attempts to resurrect the brother whose presence has been denied by his parents, causing a rift between them and their daughter: 'J'étais la soeur, eux les parents. J'étais orpheline d'un frère, eux d'un fils. Je ne pouvais pas davantage participer à leur histoire qu'eux à la mienne' (p. 214). In the fourth part of the novel, subtitled 'Les Morts', the narrator first engages on a futile quest to reinvent her brother using the country's futuristic computer technology, and, when this fails, resorts to different tactics, deliberately engineering a situation in which she can summon up his presence. Returning from a trip to London, she convinces herself that a passenger on the Eurostar is a reincarnation of her dead brother: 'Je savais que c'était mon frère' (p. 243). The willed nature of this apparition is made clear by her triple announcement of it beforehand: 'Trois heures plus tard, j'allais découvrir mon frère dans l'Eurostar' (p. 238; see also pp 241, 242). Also significant is the liminal territory, half way between England and France, in which the ghost appears.

Having conjured up her brother, the narrator, unlike the protagonists of *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, is able to lay the ghosts of the past to rest. Realising the dangers of allowing herself to become obsessed by her brothers (p. 256), she moves on to prepare for the birth of her baby and to further her literary career. In the final part of the novel, 'Naissances', she awaits with equanimity the birth of her baby, Épiphanie, whose name symbolises resurrection. Significantly (as in the case of Nore, in *Bref séjour chez les vivants*), the lost brother is replaced by a girl. Thus, in her most recent treatment of the issue of the lost brother, Darrieussecq presents a considerably more optimistic picture of the outcome of the identity quest than in her previous novel on the subject, albeit from a gendered perspective, as she suggests that women are more able than men to use traumatic experiences profitably. She also emphasises, in this strongly autobiographical novel, the valuable role of writing in the exploration and resolution of identity problems.

My selected authors, then, make significantly different use of the figure of the lost brother in their fictional identity quests. Duras reshapes him for her own ends, while Modiano quite frequently resorts to substitution in order to deal with a subject which is very painful to him. Darrieussecq confronts the issue more openly, integrating it into her theory of the *non-dit* and making imaginative use of the metaphysical to explore the impact of the loss of a child on identity within the family.

My examination of my chosen authors' identity quests under the headings of national, gender and family identity in this chapter has uncovered both striking similarities

and marked differences which shed light on the nature of the postmodern identity quest. As far as national identity is concerned, the influence of each writer's historical and social situation has, as I have demonstrated, led to very differing aims: whereas all three authors are open to multiculturalism, Modiano seeks national inclusion while Duras shuns it and Darrieussecq strives to reclaim her regional roots. Gender identity still appears to be a predominantly feminine concern, impelling women writers such as Duras and Darrieussecq to redefine female selfhood, repositioning themselves in the centre after generations of marginalisation while male authors like Modiano, by contrast, tend to regard gender as a given. The situation as regards family identity is significantly different: here I have revealed bad parenting and the loss of a family member to be strongly implicated in triggering the search for self. Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq all contest the imposition of an unwanted identity by neglectful parents as well as endeavouring to perpetuate the memory of a lost sibling. It seems, therefore, that while uncertainty as to nationality and gender are contributory factors in precipitating the postmodern identity quest, the roots of the need to reinvent the self lie within the family.

## Chapter 2: Genre, Narrative Form and the Identity Quest

La grande oeuvre crée, d'une certaine façon, un nouveau genre, et en même temps elle transgresse les règles du genre, valables auparavant.

*Tzvetan Todorov*<sup>1</sup>

How is the overriding concern with identity displayed by Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq reflected in the authors' use of genre and narrative form? This is the question which I shall address in this chapter. I shall demonstrate that the writers' shared predilection for both formal and generic innovation is closely connected to their central preoccupation with the search for self. The imperative nature of the identity quest, which drives the alienated subject to the margins, entails, on each writer's part, a reappraisal of convention involving both experimentation with narrative form and the transgression of genre boundaries. After briefly situating the recent rise in the phenomenon of genre mixing in the context of the undecidable novel, I shall discuss the three writers' attitudes to genre and narrative form before considering at greater length selected examples of their innovative combination of traditionally separate genres.

### Genre mixing

The phenomenon of genre mixing is not new: as Todorov has observed, literary genres are not immutable but have always been open to redefinition by authors who are courageous enough to break hitherto established rules. A significant rise in the incidence of genre mixing has, however, been noted recently, reflecting a literary climate characterised by an increasing rejection of convention: Gratton describes the phenomenon as 'part of a wider questioning of our fixed conceptions of borders'.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, in an uncertain world where writers are impelled to explore and redefine identity, traditional barriers between genres are increasingly perceived as artificial. Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq exemplify this trend, demonstrating a flexible attitude towards genre. All three authors turn, at times, to the borders between the macrogenres of autobiography, history and fiction as well as incorporating elements from microgenres such as crime fiction and fantasy into their

<sup>1</sup> *Poétique de la prose* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> 'Postmodern French Fiction', p. 249.

work.<sup>3</sup> In this chapter, I shall examine in detail three aspects of their use of genre mixing: their differing relationships to autofiction, Darrieussecq's frequent recourse to the fantastic and the three writers' variable use of the detective story. In each instance, the generic innovation demonstrated by the writers will be shown to be intimately linked with the search for self.

The increased use of genre mixing described above is closely connected to the significant changes in narrative practice outlined in the Introduction. After Proust's experimentation came the watershed of the *nouveau roman*, which cut off the story from its traditional past. When the *sujet* and the *récit* returned in the undecidable novel, they had changed considerably, mirroring the uncertainty of the modern age. Both the unified subject and the linear narrative were called into question in a literary climate dominated by an existential need to explore the nature of the self on the border between the real and the imaginary. This blurring of the boundaries between the autobiographical and the fictional led to the emergence of autofiction, an intermediate category in which the identification between author and subject is partial and may be variable. In Rabaté's words, 'Un espace autobiographique s'ouvre donc dans la fiction contemporaine, rendant les frontières problématiques'.<sup>4</sup> The new hybrid, combining the hitherto distinct macrogenres of fiction and autobiography, seems, therefore, to be a generic manifestation of the postmodern preoccupation with selfhood. As such, it is attractive to authors such as Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq, so I shall begin my discussion of my chosen authors' use of genre mixing by examining their variable use of this new narrative option.

The return of the subject and the story has also led to the erosion of conventional boundaries within the novel, as microgenres which were traditionally kept separate are increasingly drawn on by authors exploring identity in a postmodern context. Foremost among these are two popular genres: fantasy and crime fiction. Rabaté has remarked on a tendency towards the merging of realism with fantasy, notably in the work of Emmanuel Carrère and Marie Ndiaye.<sup>5</sup> I shall demonstrate that, like these authors, Darrieussecq makes extensive use of the fantastic in her exploration of identity, situating her search for self on the margins of the real world. I shall therefore devote a section of the chapter to an examination of her treatment of the fantastic, with especial reference to the significance in her writing of the figure of the ghost. The detective story, too, with its emphasis on the

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<sup>3</sup> Because of possible confusion regarding the use of the term 'genre', I shall use 'macrogenre' to describe broad categories, of which the novel is one, and 'microgenre' to describe subcategories of the novel. Where the wider significance of the term is clear from the context, I shall retain 'genre' *tout court*.

<sup>4</sup> *Le Roman français depuis 1900*, p. 104.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115-6.

solution of a mystery, has clear affinities with the search for self: Rabaté draws the parallel between 'quête' and 'enquête'.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, however, there are also significant differences between the conventional murder mystery, which relies on narrative closure, and the undecidable novel, which eschews it. The use made of this genre is, therefore, frequently parodic and subversive, as Kawakami has observed in her discussion of Modiano's treatment of it.<sup>7</sup> Duras and Darrieussecq also incorporate elements from crime fiction into their novels, so I shall conclude the chapter by examining the three authors' reliance on the detective story in the context of the identity quest.

As well as the return of the subject and of the narrative, a third return has been identified by Davis and Fallaize, the return to history.<sup>8</sup> As writers have sought to make sense of the impact on identity of recent historical events, such as the Holocaust, their personal or fictionalised accounts of these events have frequently proved more illuminating and revealing of what happened than the historical record itself. This has led to a reassessment of the traditional distinction between the factual historical account and historical fiction, in which the former is no longer relied on as unbiased while the latter has gained status as witness literature. Official versions of historical events have been shown to be both selective and distorted when set alongside fictionalised accounts of the same events. Thus Duras's account of French colonialism in Indochina revealed unpalatable details about the behaviour of the colonists and, even more significantly, Modiano's unrelenting onslaught throughout his fiction on the rewriting of the history of the Vichy period fatally undermined the official but flawed account of this period promoted by the postwar government, opening up the subject to debate. 'Fact', then, is being increasingly called into question by fiction. While I shall not devote a separate section to my authors' recourse to the historical in their fiction, I shall make passing reference to their innovation in this sphere in my discussion of their use of genre.

My selected writers' adventurous use of genre mixing can, then, be situated within the context of the return of the subject, the return of the story and the return to history which characterise the *récit indécidable*. There are, however, significant differences in each author's approach to genre and narrative form which I shall now summarise as a necessary prelude to a detailed discussion of their interaction with autofiction, the fantastic and the detective story.

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<sup>6</sup> *Le Roman français depuis 1900*, p. 94.

<sup>7</sup> *A Self-conscious Art*, p. 90.

<sup>8</sup> *French Fiction in the Mitterrand Years*, p. 13.



## Narrative developments in the fiction of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq

Duras's fiction is characterised by constant experimentation as she moves away from the traditional, chronological novel, gradually developing and refining her own highly idiosyncratic style of writing. Her desire to explore female identity in a rapidly changing and increasingly uncertain world can be seen as the motive force behind this remarkable formal and stylistic development. Her earliest novels, which are written according to traditional conventions, are chronological in structure, lack ellipsis and have narrative closure. By her third novel, however, the strain of remaining within these bounds was becoming evident: in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, although the conventions referred to above are generally adhered to, there are several instances where the objective, third-person narrative breaks spontaneously into the first person.<sup>9</sup> Thus the title, as well as referring to the dams created by her mother, can be seen to contain a covert reference to the author's desire to free herself from traditional restraints. Soon afterwards, the author embarked on a period of experimentation culminating in the publication, in 1958, of *Moderato cantabile*, a novel which owes much to the *nouveau roman*, in that plot and character are reduced to a minimum: loosely based on the detective story, it is circular in structure and lacks narrative closure. Having freed herself, in this novel, from the conventional mould, she continued to experiment radically with narrative form, allowing her increasing preoccupation with the enigma at the heart of female identity to dictate the structure of her novels. Thus the inconclusive narrative of *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, published six years later, circles round the inscrutability of its heroine, Lol, while in *Le Vice-consul*, a much more stylised and symbolic recreation of Duras's colonial experience than *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, linearity is contested by the intertwining of the stories of the beggar girl and Anne-Marie Stretter with that of Jean-Marc de H. No satisfactory conclusion is reached in *L'Amante anglaise* (1967), a highly enigmatic murder mystery, while two years later, in *L'Amour*, an elliptical continuation of the story of Lol, conducted mainly in dialogue in a minimalist setting, Duras dispenses with traditional narrative.

At this point in Duras's literary career, the author abandoned the novel for the cinema and the theatre. Clearly, the genre no longer fitted her purpose, which she felt to be better served by the cinematographic image and the dialogue of the theatre. Between 1973 and her return to the novel with *L'Amant* in 1984, she wrote little fiction and what she did write reads like a script for a play: *La Maladie de la mort*, a novella published in 1982, in

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<sup>9</sup> See *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, pp. 64, 82, 83, 164, 188.

the author's words, 'pourrait être représentée au théâtre'.<sup>10</sup> Why, then, did she return to the narrative? It seems to me that her preoccupation with reworking her own identity was a decisive factor here. Her dramatisation of the material of *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* as a play, *L'Eden cinéma*, in 1977 was not entirely satisfactory, as the development of her own image was constrained by the genre. With the emergence of autofiction, together with the renewed interest in confessional writing which appeared at this time, a new climate had been created in which she felt ready to approach her past less obliquely. In the space of two years, she produced first *L'Amant* and then *La Douleur*, her least fictional work, in which she used the purported rediscovery of a lost diary as the basis for an account of her husband's return from a Nazi concentration camp. The reception accorded to her recreation of her adolescence in *L'Amant* can be seen as an endorsement of the extent to which Duras was attuned to the prevailing literary atmosphere: Martin Crowley has described the novel as 'a particularly successful instance of Duras's ability to produce material which chimed with the preoccupations of the culture around her'.<sup>11</sup> Adventurous both in structure and in the author's use of narrative voice, this work, which marks the culmination of Duras's writing career, represents a milestone in the development of the literary construction of identity.

After her triumphant return to novel writing, Duras continued to experiment with the genre until her death in 1996. The novels of this late period, however, are not ground breaking, being mainly reworkings of previous themes: *Yeux bleus cheveux noirs* (1986) is an expansion of *La Maladie de la mort*, while *Emily L.* develops the maritime subject of *Le Marin de Gibraltar*. The author's final version of her childhood experiences in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, written in the style of a film script, makes no significant contribution to what she had already produced. Although these late novels add little to Duras's stature, the totality of her *oeuvre* reveals a remarkable progression, in which, as she strives to articulate the experience of women during a period of great change, she bursts out of the conventional novelistic framework which she had inherited from a previous generation and, through innovative experimentation with genre and style, finds new forms and a new voice through which to reinvent herself.

Modiano exploded onto the literary scene in 1968 with the publication of *La Place de l'étoile*, a dazzling display of literary fireworks in which the author's complete disregard for chronology and verisimilitude marked him out as an innovator. This degree of experimentation was not, however, maintained, as he soon reverted to a more sober

<sup>10</sup> See author's postscript to this work, p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Crowley, *Marguerite Duras: A Beginner's Guide* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2002), p. 36.

style, together with a more restrained use of plot and character. By his third novel, *Les Boulevards de ceinture*, he had developed a form of narrative to which he would adhere, with only minor variations, in his subsequent fiction. The essentials of this narrative can be summed up as follows: a first-person narrator bearing a varying degree of resemblance to the author embarks on a quest involving a return to his past in order to elucidate a mystery concerning his identity. In the course of this search, he amasses a wealth of evidence but these clues lead nowhere and his mission ends in failure. However the return to the past, which he has previously avoided, seeing it as threatening, proves somewhat beneficial, allowing him to move on to a new stage in his life (at which point the novel ends). Modiano has been using this formula as a basis for his novels since 1972 so that his most recent fictional work, *Accident nocturne* (2003), conforms closely to a pattern which his readers have come to recognise as a hallmark of the author's writing. Whereas the initial elaboration of this framework can be seen as innovative, incorporating elements from detective fiction, there has been little alteration over time in this use of narrative pattern but rather a progressive refinement of it as a vehicle for the author's developing identity quest.

Modiano, then, rapidly evolves a narrative form which suits his purpose. Within it, however, the nature of his search for self changes significantly as he moves from the purely personal towards an engagement with history which gives this quest a much greater resonance. After the first trilogy, which was, as we have seen, dominated by his search for his father, the author's pursuit of identity gradually broadens to encompass that of the postwar generation in France, whom he has come to represent. He equates his own desire to examine his past, which was hidden from him, with that of all those caught up in the Vichy syndrome, who had been misled as to the extent of French collaboration during World War 2. The need to return to confront an unpalatable past thus becomes essential for a whole generation, whose identity cannot develop until they have reassessed their relationship with this past. This theme is most clearly expounded in *Vestiaire de l'enfance*, written in 1989, in which the narrator's retreat to an unnamed foreign country to escape the consequences of an unspecified crime clearly parallels the mental flight from the truth of the French postwar generation. The historical events underlying this work are dealt with much more overtly in *Dora Bruder*, published in 1997, which deals with the painful issue of French complicity in the deportation of the Jews. In this work, in which the boundary between fact and fiction is deliberately left unclear by the writer, the author/narrator provides a strong condemnation of the role of French officialdom in this shameful episode. The main body of Modiano's fiction, together with his collaboration in Louis Malle's film *Lacombe Lucien* (1974), for which he wrote the script, can therefore be seen as

instrumental in dispelling the myth of the Vichy syndrome and paving the way for a reassessment of recent French history. Thus the author, while remaining within an established narrative framework, has played a major part in altering, through fiction, the self-perception of the postwar generation in France. The measure of catharsis afforded by this broadening of his search for self enables him to stand back from this quest, developing an increasingly ludic relationship with his readers whom he involves in a perpetual game of hide and seek. This is strongly in evidence in his most recent novel, *Accident nocturne*, which the critic Bertrand Leclair has qualified as quintessentially Modianesque.<sup>12</sup> It seems significant that, having perfected this form of writing, Modiano abandons fiction for autobiography in his latest work, *Un pedigree* (2005).

In the six novels which Darrieussecq has written to date, the author, in accordance with her stated aim of pushing back the frontiers of fiction,<sup>13</sup> has experimented with a variety of genres, frequently combining elements from different narrative traditions as she seeks to shed light on identity in the couple and the family. Thus her earliest novel, *Truismes*, is a fable with feminist overtones, while her next novel, *Naissance des fantômes*, appears at the outset to be a detective story but evolves into an identity quest with a metaphysical dimension. The impersonal narrative of *Le Mal de mer*, coupled with the inscrutability of the main character, contrast with the stream-of-consciousness narrative and the revelation of innermost thoughts which characterise *Bref séjour chez les vivants*. In *White*, the author combines elements from the travelogue and scientific documentary with romance and the ghost story, while in her most recent novel, *Le Pays*, she ventures into the territory of autofiction, portraying an author in the process of writing a book entitled 'Le Pays'. Though drawing on several different genres, Darrieussecq maintains in each novel a balance between the real and the fantastic, a blend which can be considered to be a unifying element in an otherwise disparate *oeuvre*. As well as these fictional works, she has written an autobiographical text, *Le Bébé*, which contrasts markedly with them, being meditative in quality and lacking a fantastic dimension.

I shall now focus on selected uses of genre mixing in the work of my three chosen authors: the nature and extent of their use of autofiction, Darrieussecq's reliance on the fantastic, and the incorporation into the writers' fiction of elements from the detective story. I shall begin by considering autofiction, which is of interest both because of its recent appearance on the literary scene and because of its controversial generic status.

<sup>12</sup> Bertrand Leclair, 'Modiano et la cinquième essence,' *La Quinzaine Littéraire* no. 862, 1-15 October 2003, pp. 7-8.

<sup>13</sup> See Daniel Mar, 'La Femme atomisée'.

## Autofiction

I have chosen to examine this genre in detail because its emergence seems to me to be a literary response to the redefinition of identity which has occurred since the 1960s. As the sociologist Jean-Claude Kaufmann has noted, this new model of identity is performative: 'l'identité est un processus, historiquement nouveau, lié à l'émergence du sujet, et dont l'essentiel tourne autour de la fabrication du sens'.<sup>14</sup> The notion of the identity quest as a dynamic process is strongly evident throughout the writing of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq, all of whom experiment with autofiction. In their exploration of *soi possibles*, they move freely between the real and the imaginary, calling into question the traditional separation between genres. The tendency to blur the boundaries between fiction and autobiography is especially prominent in Modiano's work, where the author's anguished search for self leads him into a no man's land between these two macrogenres, so that it is possible to consider his whole *oeuvre* as autofictional.<sup>15</sup> Duras and Darrieussecq, as we have seen, make more varied use of genre than Modiano but also turn on occasion to this uncertain territory. Before considering in further detail my chosen authors' interaction with autofiction, I shall outline the background to the term's appearance, compare critical responses to the new genre and state my own position as regards its scope.

The controversy surrounding autofiction has its roots in the circumstances in which it emerged. The term first appeared in 1977 in response to Lejeune, who, in elaborating his literary pacts, explicitly excluded certain hybrids between the novel and autobiography, notably that in which, in a fictional context, the author, narrator and main character are one and the same person, a category which Lejeune considered theoretically possible but unlikely to be viable.<sup>16</sup> The challenge posed by this *case aveugle* in Lejeune's grid was rapidly taken up by Doubrovsky, who, in defiance of the critic's theories, produced a work, *Fils*, which exactly fulfilled the criteria needed to fill this blank space. The birth of this new form, dubbed autofiction by its author, provoked immediate debate, a situation which was exacerbated by Doubrovsky's choice of poetic and rather non-specific language to define his new creation:

Fiction, d'événements et de faits strictement reels; si l'on veut, *autofiction*, d'avoir confié le langage d'une aventure à l'aventure du langage, hors sagesse

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<sup>14</sup> *L'Invention de soi*, p. 82.

<sup>15</sup> As Thierry Laurent has done in *L'Oeuvre de Patrick Modiano*.

<sup>16</sup> *Le Pacte autobiographique*, p. 31.

et hors syntaxe du roman, traditionnel ou nouveau. Rencontres, *fil*s des mots, allitérations, assonances, dissonances, écriture d'avant ou après littérature, *concrète*, comme on dit musique. Ou encore, autofriction, patiemment onaniste, qui espère maintenant partager son plaisir.<sup>17</sup>

Thus the term autofiction has been open from the outset to a wide variety of interpretations, from which three main positions have emerged. Firstly, there are those who dismiss it as little more than a literary game. Secondly, it can be accepted in a broad sense as applicable to much previous writing of a confessional nature. Lastly, a more restricted application of the term seeks to situate it in the context of the recent reappraisal of autobiographical writing arising from alterations in the perception of identity. I shall now give examples of these different responses to autofiction before providing my own definition of the term.

Prominent in the first group is Lejeune himself, whose scepticism towards autofiction is at once comprehensible and unexpected. Whereas his hostile reaction to Doubrovsky's refutation of his neat distinction between fiction and autobiography is easy to understand, it seems surprising that such an acknowledged authority on autobiography should not be more receptive to recent developments in the perception of the self. In his masterly study, *L'Autobiographie en France*,<sup>18</sup> he clearly endorses the first two stages of Kaufmann's theory of identity, emphasising the connection between the emergence of autobiography and the increasing awareness of the self as individual rather than collective which arose in the latter half of the eighteenth century: 'C'est à cette époque qu'on commence à prendre conscience de la valeur et de la singularité de l'expérience que chacun a de lui-même'.<sup>19</sup> He appears unable, however, to recognise a further stage in the theory of identity formation in which autofiction reflects an increasingly subjective awareness of selfhood. This lack of flexibility springs from the uncompromising view of identity expressed in *Le Pacte autobiographique*: 'Une identité est, ou n'est pas. Il n'y a pas de degré possible'.<sup>20</sup> In the light of recent theories of identity formation which emphasise the fragmentary nature of the self, such a categorical definition of identity seems unduly simplistic. Lejeune's reluctance to engage fully with new developments in the perception of identity is exemplified by his decision to reissue the main text of *L'Autobiographie en France*, which originally appeared in 1971, unchanged. No reference is therefore made to autofiction in the main body of the 1998 second edition; it is only in

<sup>17</sup> See back cover of *Fils*, author's italics.

<sup>18</sup> Paris: Armand Colin, 1971.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, second edition (1998), p. 42.

<sup>20</sup> *Le Pacte autobiographique*, p. 15.

the updated reference section of this work that the author grudgingly acknowledges its existence, admitting that this new form 'éclaire les marges incertaines du genre'.<sup>21</sup> Listing three undecidable works by Duras, *L'Amant*, *La Douleur* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* in his autobiographical canon, he concedes that other borderline texts, notably those of Modiano, ought perhaps to have been considered for inclusion: 'Cette zone intermédiaire entre autobiographie et fiction aurait pu être illustrée de bien d'autres exemples, en particulier celui de Patrick Modiano ...'<sup>22</sup> In spite of these concessions, however, Lejeune makes it abundantly clear in his most recent work, *Le Pacte autobiographique Tome 2: Signes de vie*,<sup>23</sup> that he does not endorse autofiction but considers *récit* and *roman* to be incompatible:

Quant au fait que l'identité individuelle, dans l'écriture comme dans la vie, passe par le récit, cela ne veut nullement dire qu'elle soit une fiction. En me mettant par écrit, je ne fais que prolonger ce travail de création d'« identité narrative », comme dit Ricoeur, en lequel consiste toute vie. Bien sûr, en essayant de mieux me voir, je continue à me créer, je mets au propre les brouillons de mon identité, et ce mouvement va provisoirement les styliser ou les simplifier. Mais je ne joue pas à m'inventer. Empruntant les voies du récit, au contraire, je suis fidèle à ma vérité: tous les hommes qui marchent dans la rue sont des hommes-récits, c'est pour cela qu'ils tiennent debout. Si l'identité est un imaginaire, l'autobiographie qui colle à cet imaginaire est du côté de la vérité. Aucun rapport avec le jeu délibéré de la fiction.<sup>24</sup>

His emphasis on the notion of *vérité* in the context of the search for self demonstrates that his notion of identity formation has not progressed as far as Kaufmann's *invention de soi*.

In marked contrast, Vincent Colonna emerged as a strong proponent of the new genre, to which he devoted a magisterial but unpublished thesis entitled 'L'Autofiction, essai sur la fictionalisation de soi en littérature'.<sup>25</sup> In this work, he provides a very broad definition of the genre as 'une oeuvre littéraire par laquelle un écrivain s'invente une personnalité et une existence, tout en conservant son identité réelle'.<sup>26</sup> His maximalist definition of autofiction, while attractive in its emphasis on the dynamic, creative nature of the identity quest, is, however, problematic in that it could be applied retrospectively to many prominent works of literature which are normally regarded as fiction. Pursuing this argument further has led to a remarkable volte face on Colonna's part in which his original

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>22</sup> *Le Pacte autobiographique*, p. 94.

<sup>23</sup> Paris: Seuil, 2005.

<sup>24</sup> *Signes de vie*, p. 170.

<sup>25</sup> Unpublished doctoral thesis, E.H.E.S.S., 1989.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

enthusiasm for autofiction has waned. In a recent work entitled *Autofiction et autres mythomanies littéraires*,<sup>27</sup> he postulates the second-century author Lucian of Samostrata as the originator of autofiction, thereby minimising the importance of the genre as a postmodern phenomenon. For him, 'l'autofiction est virtuellement présente dans toute fiction, intérieure au mécanisme de la création imaginaire',<sup>28</sup> so that the term loses its specificity, as the book's dismissive title suggests. For Colonna, the many modern French authors who figure in his list of writers of *autofictions contemporaines*, including Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq,<sup>29</sup> are merely perpetuating an ancient tradition.

Paradoxically, then, neither critic is prepared to endorse autofiction as a literary reflection of the modern identity crisis. It has therefore been left to those who take a less extreme position to provide a more meaningful discussion of the term in which the link between autofiction and modern developments in autobiographical writing is recognised. Jacques Lecarme, who, with Lejeune and Doubrovsky, convened a conference on the subject of autofiction at Nanterre in 1991-2, has been instrumental in this respect. At the conference, which attempted to resolve the controversy surrounding autofiction, Lecarme addressed the question of its status, examining different definitions of the genre. Rejecting that of Genette: 'un récit de fiction, homodiégétique, communément baptisé depuis quelques années, autofiction'<sup>30</sup> as limited, he provided his own more precise definition: 'l'autofiction est d'abord un dispositif très simple: soit un récit dont auteur, narrateur et protagoniste partagent la même identité nominale et dont l'intitulé générique indique qu'il s'agit d'un roman'.<sup>31</sup> In the light of Colonna's broader definition of the genre, he went on to examine the acceptability of a range of modern novels as autofiction in both a narrower and a wider sense. Attacking the hostility of certain critics to both *réécits indécidables* and autofiction, he concluded by endorsing the validity of autofiction as a genre.<sup>32</sup>

Whereas Lecarme's contribution to the rehabilitation of autofiction was timely, his definition of the genre appears to me to be rather narrow. As we shall see, the issue of naming is not always straightforward and his insistence on the importance of the mention of *roman* on the book's cover (or, at the very least, elsewhere in the text) seems unnecessarily rigid, given the variations in practice which exist between different authors and editors as to such rubrics. To my mind, Lecarme's definition is unnecessarily rule

<sup>27</sup> Auch: Éditions Tristram, 2004.

<sup>28</sup> *Autofiction et autres mythomanies littéraires*, p. 153.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>30</sup> *Nouveau discours du récit*, p. 94.

<sup>31</sup> Jacques Lecarme, 'L'Autofiction, un mauvais genre?' in Serge Doubrovsky, Jacques Lecarme and Philippe Lejeune (eds.), *Autofiction et Cie*, RITM 6 (Nanterre: Université Paris X – Nanterre, 1993), pp. 227-249 (p. 227)..

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp232-3, pp. 248-9.



bound, failing to emphasise the ambivalence which underlies the genre. It is instructive that it is a novelist rather than a critic who has, in my opinion, provided the most comprehensive account of autofiction in the context of the postmodern identity quest. This writer is none other than Marie Darrieussecq, who, like Lecarme, sprang to the genre's defence: while he refuted the charge that it was a 'mauvais genre', she attacked those who consider it to be 'un genre pas sérieux'. Her definition of the genre is somewhat more flexible than that of Lecarme and, by introducing a new criterion, *vraisemblance*, she also distances herself from Colonna's approach: for Darrieussecq, 'l'autofiction est un récit à la première personne, se donnant pour fictif (souvent, on trouvera la mention *roman* sur la couverture), mais où l'auteur apparaît homodiégétiquement sous son nom propre, et où la vraisemblance est un enjeu maintenu par de multiples « effets de vie » - contrairement à l'autofiction telle que l'entend Colonna'.<sup>33</sup> She then turns to a consideration of the role of autofiction in modern literature, providing an account of its validity which is considerably more comprehensive than that of Lecarme. Situating its rise in the context of the insufficiency of the traditional autobiography as a vehicle for the search for self, she emphasises the importance of autofiction in recognising 'la part de brouillage et de fiction due en particulier à l'inconscient' in an individual's life.<sup>34</sup> For her, this new literary form is profoundly ambiguous, demanding both belief and the suspension of belief simultaneously and leaving the reader unable to distinguish fact from fiction: 'l'autofiction ne permet pas au lecteur de disposer des clés pour différencier l'énoncé de la réalité et l'énoncé de fiction.' Thus, autofiction is 'un texte indécidable en bloc'.<sup>35</sup> She concludes by insisting on the importance of the destabilising role of autofiction, while minimising the necessity for the genre to conform exactly to the type of criteria insisted on by earlier critics: 'De plus, dire que l'autofiction penche plutôt du côté de l'autobiographie ou plutôt du côté du roman à la première personne, c'est prendre le problème à l'un ou à l'autre bout, et ce n'est pas là l'essentiel. L'important est de constater à quel point l'autofiction met en cause la pratique « naïve » de l'autobiographie'.<sup>36</sup>

Darrieussecq, as an author, seems to me to have shed considerably more light on the nature of autofiction than previous critics. Autofiction, according to her, can be regarded as an intermediate category, poised between fact and fiction and thus ideally suited to the exploration of the *soi possibles* of the modern self, a broader and more satisfactory description of the genre than that which limits it to merely fulfilling certain

<sup>33</sup> 'L'Autofiction, un genre pas sérieux', p. 370.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 377.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 378.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 379.

criteria in order to fill one of the blank squares in Lejeune's diagram. Darrieussecq's considerable contribution to the autofiction debate has been widely recognised: the Parisian academic Thomas Clerc, for example, adopts her definition of the genre, concluding that 'l'autofiction a le mérite de faire voler en éclats la question du vrai ou faux: mensonges, oublis, fantasmes et mises en scène n'invalident pas, comme on l'a déjà dit, la vérité du sujet ou du texte, mais sa simple factualité'.<sup>37</sup> I am in general agreement with this view of autofiction, which emphasises the subjectivity of the search for self. I do not, however, regard Darrieussecq's initial definition of the genre as sufficiently comprehensive, given the later developments in her argument which I have outlined above. I therefore wish to provide my own slightly wider definition, which reflects this broader approach. This definition is as follows: autofiction is a homodiegetic narrative with a discernible autobiographical focus, normally but not necessarily written in the first person, in which the author and narrator share clearly recognisable characteristics and in which fact and fiction are combined in such a way as to render the status of the text undecidably ambiguous. In discussing the relationship of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq to autofiction, I shall refer to the different definitions of autofiction considered above, including my own.

### Duras and autofiction

Duras was fascinated by her own identity, the quest for which impelled her to start writing and underlies her *oeuvre*. Although this search for self was carried out mainly through the medium of fictional characters such as Anne Desbaresdes and Lol V. Stein, the author provides three prose accounts based on her own adolescent experiences: *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, *L'Amant* and *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. To what extent can these semi-autobiographical works be regarded as autofictional, exemplifying an undecidable fusion of fact and fiction in which the exploration of the self can be taken further than in the traditional novel or autobiography?

The objective, third-person narrative of *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, together with the lack of identification between author and narrator, rule it out as autofiction. At the time when this novel was written, the conditions in which autofiction emerged did not yet pertain, so that the two possibilities open to Duras when she set out to explore aspects of her adolescence in French Indochina were autobiography and fiction. Her choice of the latter was probably influenced by the fact that her mother, who figures prominently in the

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<sup>37</sup> *Les Écrits personnels*, p. 71.

novel, was still alive. As noted previously, the third-person disguise occasionally slips with the intrusion of first-person pronouns and possessives, suggesting that the author did not feel entirely comfortable transposing her own experience into the framework of the conventional novel. By the time she came to revisit these events a quarter of a century later, much had changed. The writer's mother and brothers had died and a revolution had taken place in the perception of identity. Duras, therefore, was able to abandon the traditional narrative style of the earlier novel and to adopt a much more innovative approach, in which the distinction between fact and fiction was eroded.

*L'Amant*, then, comes significantly closer to autofiction than the earlier novel. Strictly speaking, however, according to Lecarme's minimalist definition of the genre examined above, the novel fails to qualify as autofiction on two counts: firstly, the narrator (and main character) does not bear the author's name and secondly, the rubric *roman* is absent from the book's cover. For this reason, Lecarme excludes it from his list of autofictional works, describing it as follows: 'point de prénom, point de nom, point de péritexte; rien que la blanche virginité de la couverture, chère aux Éditions de Minuit'.<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, however, Doubrovsky is in disagreement with Lecarme on this issue, regarding *L'Amant* as autofictional because it succeeds in transforming 'le champ autobiographique en espace romanesque'.<sup>39</sup> The automatic rejection of *L'Amant* as autofiction by Lecarme on the grounds mentioned above seems to me to be questionable, especially if some measure of flexibility is permitted in the application of the above-mentioned criteria. As far as the narrator's identity is concerned, there is nothing in the text to suggest that she is not the same person as the author. Whereas she is not named, the identification of her mother,<sup>40</sup> her younger brother<sup>41</sup> and her mother's first husband<sup>42</sup> provide unmistakable clues as to her identity. Another more oblique reference in which her brother after his death is described as having been 'rappelé à Dieu' (p. 126) hints at the family name, Donnadiou. The narrator is also clearly alluding to *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* when she states at the outset of the novel: 'L'histoire d'une toute petite partie de ma jeunesse je l'ai plus ou moins écrite déjà' (p.14) and the inclusion later in the book of detailed descriptions of two of Duras's wartime friends, Marie-Claude Carpenter and Betty Fernandez (pp. 79-85), further reinforces the identification between writer and narrator. Thus, although Duras chooses to withhold the narrator's name, her identity is not open to

<sup>38</sup> 'L'Autofiction, un mauvais genre?', p. 238.

<sup>39</sup> Serge Doubrovsky, 'Textes en main' in *Autofictions et Cie*, pp. 207-217 (p. 215).

<sup>40</sup> Identified as 'Marie Legrand de Roubaix' on p. 59.

<sup>41</sup> Identified as 'Paulo' on p. 98.

<sup>42</sup> Identified as 'monsieur Obscur' on p. 113.

dispute. As regards the designation of the work as a novel, Duras herself made it clear that she preferred to leave the classification of the text as fact or fiction in the hands of the reader: when asked to include the word *roman* on the cover she replied: 'J'ai dit que je pouvais le mettre et puis je ne l'ai pas mis. J'ai préféré la sécheresse du blanc. Qu'on dise "roman" ou non, au fond, ça les regarde, les lecteurs. La lecture, c'est le roman'.<sup>43</sup> Therefore the identification of the work as a novel or otherwise is left open.

In the light of the above considerations, Lecarme's outright rejection of *L'Amant* as autofiction seems arbitrary. The work, however, clearly exceeds the scope of autofiction in the restricted sense envisaged by him. As we have seen, Duras's writing career was characterised by generic adventurousness and her refusal to name herself as the subject of *L'Amant* or to assign it to a literary category exemplify this tendency on the author's part to defy convention. As Loignon has observed: 'En effet, le texte durassien ne relève jamais d'un genre pur. Il a du mal à trouver une définition générique stable et unique'.<sup>44</sup> Can *L'Amant*, then, be assigned to a particular genre? Lecarme thinks not: '*L'Amant* ne relève d'aucun genre, sinon d'un genre indéterminé qui fonctionne sur un principe d'indétermination'.<sup>45</sup> This seems to place it squarely in the centre of Lejeune's grid, in the box marked 'indéterminé' and described by the author in the following terms: '*Pacte* = 0: non seulement le personnage n'a pas de nom, mais l'auteur ne conclut aucun pacte – ni autobiographique, ni romanesque. L'indétermination est totale'.<sup>46</sup>

A different conclusion may be arrived at if *L'Amant* is examined in the light of the wider definition of autofiction put forward at the end of the last section, in which autofiction is viewed as a genre whose *raison d'être* is the redefinition of autobiography in the context of the identity quest. This appears to me to be precisely what Duras is endeavouring to do in *L'Amant*. After the death of her mother and brothers, she at last felt able to present an image of herself which would counterbalance the identity they had imposed on her. No longer obliged to gloss over certain details of her sexual awakening, she could now explore these 'périodes cachées' of her adolescence without fear of hostility from her family. Recent changes in the perception and expression of selfhood had created a literary climate which was receptive to her use of a hybrid form between fiction and autobiography to reinvent herself. She was thus able to approach autobiographical writing from a radically new perspective which reflected her conviction that identity could no longer be conceived of as a coherent whole enclosed in a linear narrative: 'L'histoire de ma

<sup>43</sup> See Marianne Alphant, 'Duras à l'état sauvage', *Libération*, 4 September 1984, pp. 28-9.

<sup>44</sup> *Marguerite Duras*, p. 139.

<sup>45</sup> 'L'Autofiction, un mauvais genre?', p. 238.

<sup>46</sup> *Le Pacte autobiographique*, p. 29.

vie n'existe pas. Ça n'existe pas. Il n'a jamais de centre. Pas de chemin, pas de ligne' (p. 14).

How is *L'Amant* subversive of the conventions associated with the autobiography? The author's decision to begin the book with a description of her recent self before moving back in time to her adolescence in French Indochina is not of itself revolutionary, as retrospection is a common device in autobiographical writing. What is innovative is Duras's subsequent refusal to fill the gap between past and present in anything resembling linear form. Instead she jumps between different periods of her life, returning obsessively to the image of her teenage self which recurs throughout the text, giving it a circular structure. She also introduces a revolutionary shift in the conventions of the autobiography, in which first-person narration is the norm, by alternating between *je* and *elle* throughout the novel, thus frequently changing the focus between subjectivity and objectivity. The distancing caused by the use of the third-person pronoun calls into question received ideas about the continuity of the self over time: to what extent are the author/narrator and the adolescent around whom the text circles one and the same person?

The ambiguity introduced into the text by pronoun switching is reinforced by the incorporation of other destabilising elements, such as the inclusion of both real and fictional characters: Betty Fernandez and Marie-Claude Carpenter, for example, were wartime acquaintances of the author, while H  l  ne Lagonelle is a fictional approximation of a schoolfriend. Paradoxically, however, the role of the former is much less well-developed than that of the latter: whereas the two wartime friends obliquely introduce the theme of betrayal into the text, the fictionalised schoolmate plays an important part in the development of the affair with the Chinese lover, which is central to the work. The most ambivalent element of *L'Amant*, however, is undoubtedly constituted by Duras's subversive use of the photographic image, to which I shall now turn my attention.

Duras's use of the photograph in *L'Amant* is both startlingly original and highly unorthodox. Having originally intended to structure the work around family photographs, she abandoned this plan for a much more radical device, involving the use of a virtual photograph as the defining image round which the text is centred. This photograph, as the narrator informs us, could have been taken but in fact was not: 'Elle aurait pu exister, une photographie aurait pu   tre prise, comme un autre, ailleurs, dans d'autres circonstances'.<sup>47</sup> By means of this innovation, Duras challenges the power of the photograph to define identity. For her, as for Barthes,<sup>48</sup> the self is constantly being recreated and therefore

<sup>47</sup> *L'Amant*, p. 16.

<sup>48</sup> Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), p. 31.

cannot be fixed by photography, which she sees as death dealing: 'La photo aide à l'oubli. [...] Ça confirme la mort'.<sup>49</sup> Thus, throughout *L'Amant*, the static images in the family album are contrasted with the dynamism of the recurring virtual image. The family photograph is also seen as perpetuating a spurious image of unity in a family riven by dissension. Such photographs, once taken, acquire emblematic status, becoming substitutes for the need to develop relationships within the family: 'Les photos, on les regarde, on ne se regarde pas mais on regarde les photographies' (p. 115). Where reality is out of phase with the image represented by the photograph, it can be discarded: the adolescent can no longer be taken to visit her aunts because of her scandalous behaviour, so photographs replace her: 'Alors il ne reste à ma mère que les photographies à montrer' (p. 117). Photographs, unlike people, are not dynamic and can be put aside after use: 'Une fois regardées, les photos sont rangées avec le linge dans les armoires' (p. 115). The virtual photograph, on the other hand retains both its plasticity and its ambivalence, symbolised by the man's felt hat worn by the adolescent which introduces an androgynous note into the depiction of the teenager on the threshold of sexual awareness: 'L'ambiguïté déterminante de l'image, elle est dans ce chapeau' (p. 19). In building up this image, which she then evokes at frequent intervals throughout the text, Duras demonstrates an instinctive understanding of the workings of memory, in which memory retains its plasticity, so that each time a memory is revisited, it is subtly altered. For Duras, then, autobiographical writing involves the reshaping of the self round the dynamic image, which, in a world where the denotational power of words has become suspect, remains a prime focus for identity. This equates well with Darrieussecq's description of autofiction as 'le lieu de la parole qui échappe',<sup>50</sup> as, in the borderland between fact and fiction, language loses its illocutionary force. In my opinion, therefore, if autofiction is defined in a broad sense as writing which is at once undecidable and subversive of the conventional autobiography, *L'Amant* is a striking example of the genre.

Duras's final reworking of her adolescence in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* seems to me to be a less likely candidate for autofictional status than *L'Amant*. Although the subject matter is substantially the same, its treatment is considerably less innovative than that of the earlier work. The narrative is linear and pronoun switching is replaced by third-person narrative, as the author distances herself from her childhood self. The unnamed heroine is referred to as 'l'enfant' throughout the text and thus fixed in a pre-adolescent state rather than developing as a teenager, as in *L'Amant*. Clearly, then, although the

<sup>49</sup> *La Vie matérielle*, p. 113.

<sup>50</sup> 'L'Autofiction, un genre pas sérieux', p. 378.

identification between Duras and her heroine can be made from peripheral material, the use of the third person throughout the book renders the work's status as autofiction improbable. Curiously, however, in the light of Lecarme's second criterion for autofiction, Duras insists in the introduction to this work on its definition as a novel: 'Je suis redevenue un écrivain de romans',<sup>51</sup> thus signalling that she regarded it differently from *L'Amant*. According to Lecarme's definition, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* then becomes at once less and more autofictional than *L'Amant*, which is clearly contradictory. This reinforces my opinion that a narrow rule-based approach to autofiction is unsatisfactory in that it fails to differentiate between a text which sheds a new light on the shifting nature of the self and one which presents a much less nuanced picture of identity. The use of the broader criteria of ambiguity and generic undecidability which I posited earlier clarifies the situation, enabling a clear distinction to be made between the two works, of which only *L'Amant*, a radical reappraisal of selfhood, qualifies as autofictional.

### Modiano and autofiction

Modiano's relationship to autofiction is substantially different from that of Duras and Darrieussecq in that his search for self is conducted entirely on the border between fiction and autobiography. He can thus be regarded as a pioneer of the new genre: it is noteworthy that his experimentation in this field started nearly a decade before Doubrovsky coined the term. Whereas Modiano's contribution to the development of autofiction has been widely recognised, there is, however, considerable disagreement as to how many and which of his works can be considered to be autofictional. Lecarme, following his narrow definition of the genre, is only willing to accord autofictional status to the relatively few novels in which there is clear nominal identification between the author and the narrator/main character, namely *Livret de famille*, *De si braves garçons*, *Remise de peine* and *Fleurs de ruine*.<sup>52</sup> Laurent, on the other hand, who takes a much wider view of autofiction, makes a convincing case for extending this status to the whole of Modiano's fiction.

I am in general agreement with Laurent, whose approach has the advantage of emphasising the underlying unity of Modiano's *oeuvre*, a judgement which is borne out by the author's own description of it as 'une sorte d'autobiographie inconsciente et diffuse'.<sup>53</sup> Lecarme's view, in comparison, springs from a division of Modiano's work into *récits* and

<sup>51</sup> *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, p. 12.

<sup>52</sup> 'L'Autofiction, un mauvais genre?', p. 234.

<sup>53</sup> See Laurence Vidal, 'Modiano: Le passé recomposé', *Le Figaro Littéraire*, 4 January 1996, p. 3.

*romans* which seems artificial and, furthermore, is subject to editorial inconsistencies.<sup>54</sup> I shall now summarise Laurent's reasons for regarding the totality of Modiano's novelistic output as autofictional. Distancing himself from the debate as to the exact nature of autofiction, Laurent refuses to restrict himself to a particular definition of the term: 'nous ne nous sentons pas prisonnier de telle ou telle définition trop précise de l'autofiction, d'autant moins que celle-ci n'est pas un genre.'<sup>55</sup> This refusal to regard autofiction as a genre allows him to consider it as a continuum lying between autobiography and the conventional novel, on which Modiano's works can be situated. Criticising Lejeune's distinction between the *pacte autobiographique* and the *pacte romanesque* as too rigid, Laurent proposes a new pact, the *pacte d'autofiction*,<sup>56</sup> which comes into existence when an author identifies his work as containing elements of both fact and fiction. As he demonstrates, this is clearly true of Modiano, who has frequently described his work in such terms, as in the following example: 'Il y a toujours une part autobiographique dans un roman, mais il faut la transposer, l'amplifier, essayer de retrouver l'essentiel des êtres à travers leur apparence quotidienne, structurer ce que dans la vie est en désordre.'<sup>57</sup>

Having established that Modiano's work is indeed autofictional according to this new criterion, Laurent proceeds to examine firstly the author's reason for choosing this form of writing and secondly the characteristics of Modiano's autofiction. For Laurent, Modiano's choice of autofiction has both a psychological and an aesthetic basis. From a psychological point of view, Modiano was impelled to write to exorcise the traumatic events of his childhood and adolescence. The creation of a semi-fictional context in which to explore his origins had a cathartic effect, enabling the writer to work through his troubled past in order to move forward. Laurent also identifies an element of escapism in Modiano's withdrawal into an imaginary world, as well as a desire to recreate the past in the face of the unreliability of memory: 'Travestir le passé vaut mieux que l'ignorer'.<sup>58</sup> From an aesthetic point of view, the author was drawn to fiction both because of its ludic possibilities and because it better expressed his distrust of conventional autobiography: 'Mentir sur sa propre vie ou en déformer le contenu, c'est exprimer l'impossibilité de l'auto-connaissance'.<sup>59</sup> Laurent regards Modiano's writing as being characterised by ambiguity, which, as previously noted, was identified by Darrieussecq as intrinsic to

<sup>54</sup> To give one example, *Dora Bruder* has no rubric on the cover of the Gallimard edition but is cited as a *roman* inside the front cover of *Accident nocturne*.

<sup>55</sup> *L'Oeuvre de Patrick Modiano*, p. 12.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>57</sup> From Victor Malka, 'Patrick Modiano: Un homme sur du sable mouvant', *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, 30 Oct. – 5 Nov. 1972, p. 2, quoted by Laurent, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>58</sup> *L'Oeuvre de Patrick Modiano*, p. 29.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.



autofiction. He also emphasises the role of *vraisemblance* in Modiano's work, commenting, however, on its paradoxical quality, as the illusion of reality created by the author's inclusion into his novels of a wealth of detail is undermined by the deliberate falsification of certain key facts. Thus Modiano raises ambiguity to an art form by using the real as a springboard for his imagination while purporting to construct his narratives round personal memories.

Laurent's view is compelling in that it enables Modiano's writing to be seen as a unified whole. Furthermore, the author appears to sanction this approach by his endorsement of the term autofiction in a letter to Laurent which forms the introduction to the latter's book.<sup>60</sup> There is, however, a slight drawback in that Laurent clearly does not consider autofiction as a genre but rather as an element which is present in varying degrees in Modiano's fiction: as he has stated, 'le dosage est variable d'un livre à l'autre'.<sup>61</sup> I disagree with him here, as I consider that his refusal to grant generic status to this new literary development minimises its significance as a challenge to more conventional depictions of selfhood. As mentioned previously, I consider the emergence of autofiction to be a manifestation of changing perceptions of identity and I would therefore concur with Lecarme and Darrieussecq in regarding it as a valid genre which has arisen to fill the space between fiction and autobiography. It seems to me, however, that it is perfectly possible to retain Laurent's notion of an autofictional spectrum while positing a definition, such as the one I provided earlier, which will serve to demarcate the outer limits of the genre. Thus a wide range of novels, from the near autobiographical to the strongly fictional, can be considered as autofiction as long as the necessary ambiguity between the two parent genres is present. I shall now examine Modiano's novels in the light of my previous definition of autofiction.

Only two of the books which comprise Modiano's literary identity quest are definitely excluded from the category of autofiction according to this definition: his first and last works, *La Place de l'étoile* and *Un Pedigree*. *La Place de l'étoile*, which fails to qualify on the grounds of its composite, stereotypical main character and its complete lack of *vraisemblance*, is different in kind from Modiano's later writing, functioning both as an opening statement of themes which will remain prominent throughout the later novels and as a meditation on the nature of Jewish identity. *Un Pedigree*, a short chronological account of Modiano's early life, is unambiguously factual and thus clearly cannot be autofictional. As far as the other novels are concerned, all can be seen to lie within the

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

boundaries of the genre as defined above, with the possible exception of Modiano's second work, *La Ronde de nuit*, where the narrator is more strongly identified with the father than with the son and which can perhaps, therefore, be regarded as transitional. Modiano's *oeuvre*, then, assumes a shape consisting of a fictional prelude, an autofictional centre and an autobiographical coda.<sup>62</sup> The *romans* and *récits* which make up the central body of the author's identity quest, though variable in their degree of fictionality, are linked in that, in every case, there is a recognisable but incomplete degree of identification between author and narrator, rendering these works ambiguous. In each successive articulation of the search for self, Modiano combines fiction and autobiography in different proportions, emphasising the shifting nature of selfhood. On close inspection, works which appear strongly autobiographical conceal inconsistencies which undermine this interpretation while even the most fictional texts contain multiple veiled references to the writer's own life. Thus, in *Livret de famille*, the undisputed identification provided by the naming of the narrator first as 'M. Modiano' (p. 30) and then as 'Patrick' (p. 214) is subverted by the inclusion of false details, such as the reference on the penultimate page to the narrator's sister.<sup>63</sup> In contrast, a careful reading of *Une Jeunesse*, which, with its third person narrative and split narrators, seems an unlikely candidate for autofictional status, reveals many strong similarities between the author and the central protagonists. Louis is the same age as his creator (p. 11) and was born in the same month (p. 20). Both Louis and Modiano are from Paris (p. 18) and pretend to be students (p. 85). Louis, like Modiano, has a father with connections with the Vichy regime (pp. 35, 68, 76) and a mother who was a Belgian showgirl (p. 69). Odile, whose age and background are similar, is the child of an unknown father (p. 44), had a mother who was involved with the black market during the Occupation (p. 45) and has a morbid fear of losing her passport (p. 51). It appears to me, then, that in spite of their apparent differences, the successive reworkings of the identity quest in the main corpus of Modiano's work, after the dramatic opening statement of *La Place de l'étoile*, share a sufficient underlying similarity to enable them to be regarded as belonging to a single genre. Thus, while concurring almost completely with Laurent in his reading of Modiano's output as autofictional, I differ from him as regards the generic status of this new literary form.

In two recent novels, published after the appearance of Laurent's study of Modiano's work as autofiction, the author has further refined his use of this genre. As these two works are situated at either end of the fictional scale, I shall now compare them,

<sup>62</sup> Assuming, as seems likely, that he does not return to the fictionalised identity quest.

<sup>63</sup> Modiano, of course, had no such sister.

considering how they illustrate the author's developing use of autofiction. The first of these, *Dora Bruder*, published in 1997, is the most *vraisemblable* of Modiano's works to date, containing much factual and autobiographical material. Although the narrator is not named, his identification with the author is made abundantly clear when he claims authorship of two of Modiano's works, *La Place de l'étoile* and *Voyage de nocces*.<sup>64</sup> His age tallies with that of the author,<sup>65</sup> as do many details of his family history, notably his tendency to abscond from school. This work differs from Modiano's previous writing in that the ambiguity introduced into the text through the introduction of biographical inconsistencies which undermine the veracity of the narrative is largely absent here. Also missing from *Dora Bruder* are stock fictional characters such as Philippe de Bellune, whose presence alongside real historical figures introduces a note of ambivalence into the majority of Modiano's other novels. The work revolves round the narrator's search for information concerning the life of a Holocaust victim, which involves him in the painstaking collection of a large amount of documentary material, giving the book a biographical as well as an autobiographical character. Significantly, the status of this material as fact or fiction is not made clear to the reader, although it has become apparent since *Dora Bruder*'s publication that its heroine really existed.<sup>66</sup>

*Dora Bruder*, therefore, differs from Modiano's previous writing in its greater verisimilitude. The author also departs from his normal practice by introducing a main character who is not the narrator, although the latter identifies strongly with her. In this work, the focus switches from the first-person narrator to the third-person heroine, a Jewish teenager who perished in the Holocaust. Having discovered her existence by chance from a newspaper cutting, the narrator sets out to investigate her identity and elucidate her fate. Thus the search for self which underlies Modiano's *oeuvre* is displaced from the author/narrator to a third person. Why does Modiano introduce this change in viewpoint? It seems to me that the altered narrative pattern in *Dora Bruder*, while at first appearing quite radical, can in fact be considered to represent a further development in the writer's identity quest. Having largely abandoned the quest for his father, Modiano had already widened his search for self to embrace the children of those involved in the Occupation, as demonstrated by novels such as *Vestiaire de l'enfance*, so a step further into the shoes of a Holocaust victim can be seen as a logical progression. *Dora Bruder*, however, can be read on more than one level: while constituting first and foremost a poignant attempt to

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<sup>64</sup> See *Dora Bruder*, pp. 53, 100.

<sup>65</sup> See *Dora Bruder*, p. 21.

<sup>66</sup> The photographs of Dora and her family referred to on pp. 31-3 and 90-2 of *Dora Bruder* have recently appeared in the Japanese edition of the book, having been absent from previous editions.

reconstruct the life of a Jewish deportee, it also contains a more covert autobiographical dimension. Whereas the narrator is careful to distinguish between the gravity of Dora's situation and his own teenage predicament, a clear parallel is drawn between the two adolescents, centred round the themes of rebellion and flight. An even stronger identification is suggested between Dora and Modiano's brother Rudy, both of whom disappeared forever on the threshold of adult life. It seems plausible that Modiano's decision to research the fate of his Jewish subject was influenced by her name, which can be interpreted as a coded reference to Rudy, Modiano's adored brother.<sup>67</sup> Significantly, for the first time in Modiano's writing, the book has no dedication, reinforcing this interpretation, in which the novel itself can be seen as a tribute not only to Dora Bruder but also to Modiano's brother, rendering a mention of Rudy by name at the front of the work superfluous.<sup>68</sup>

The generic status of Modiano's least fictional work to date has been the subject of considerable controversy. Gratton refers to 'his biography *Dora Bruder*',<sup>69</sup> an appellation which seems hard to justify given the paucity of the facts available about Dora and the fact that it is necessary to go beyond the text to identify her positively as a real person. This inherent ambiguity guarantees the book's autofictional status according to Darrieussecq's definition: it is a truly undecidable work, containing a high degree of verisimilitude, whose interpretation as fact or fiction is left in the reader's hands. Alongside Modiano's primary purpose of perpetuating Dora's memory, therefore, he can also be seen to be playing with his reader by failing to resolve this ambiguity, with the result that, as Dervila Cooke has observed, the book is likely to be interpreted differently by readers new to Modiano's work, who will favour a factual reading, as opposed to multiple-text readers, who may expect a degree of fictionality.<sup>70</sup> Because of this uncertainty, Cooke is considerably more circumspect than Gratton in pigeonholing *Dora Bruder*, concluding that, as well as being an *enquête* and a commemoration, it is 'perhaps also a biofiction'.<sup>71</sup> It appears to me that although *Dora Bruder* represents a new departure in the direction of biography, it is still very much part of the author's personal identity quest. It conforms to my definition of autofiction, with the additional element of the displacement of the narrator's search for self

<sup>67</sup> See Colin Nettelbeck, 'Novelists and their Engagement with History: Some Contemporary French Cases', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, XXXV, 2, (1998), 243-256, p. 246, who concurs with this view, regarding the significance of the name Dora Bruder as being more than coincidental.

<sup>68</sup> The first eight novels are dedicated to Rudy Modiano.

<sup>69</sup> Johnnie Gratton: 'Postmemory, Prememory, Paramemory: The Writing of Patrick Modiano' in *French Studies*, Vol. LIX, 1, (2005), 39-45, p. 43.

<sup>70</sup> Dervila Cooke: *Present Pasts: Patrick Modiano's (Auto)biographical Fictions* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 26-7.

<sup>71</sup> *Present Pasts*, p. 288.

onto a third person, with whom he identifies strongly. It could thus be considered as autofiction, in which autofiction is extended to encompass a biographical subject, thus giving the identity quest a historical dimension. Nettelbeck, in contrast to Gratton, concurs with a view in which the fictional component of *Dora Bruder* remains significant. For him, the book's presentation as a quasi-historical investigation is deceptive: 'Within the first few pages, however, it becomes evident that Modiano is deploying the same thematic material and the same literary strategies that he uses in his narrative fiction, and it would not be surprising, in due course, to see the word "roman" appear under the title, as has happened with *Remise de peine*'.<sup>72</sup> I am in agreement with Nettelbeck here, as, to my mind, *Dora Bruder*, while representing a new development in Modiano's writing, nevertheless remains part and parcel of the author's identity quest.

*La Petite Bijou*, published in 2001, contrasts markedly with *Dora Bruder*, being much more strongly fictionalised. There is, however, a connection between these texts in that Modiano, having empathised with Dora, subsequently experiments with a female narrator. After introducing this narrative change in the three novellas which make up *Des Inconnues* (1999), he goes further in *La Petite Bijou*, exploring the identity quest from the point of view of a daughter seeking her mother. The identity between author and narrator is therefore only partial. A characteristic element of this work, however, is transposed identity, so elements of the author are to be found not only in the narrator but in the narrator's boyfriend, a polyglot translator of multinational origins who answers to more than one name and who is referred to obliquely as 'Patoche' when the narrator speculates as to his childhood nicknames (p. 120). The mother has clear affinities with Modiano's own mother, being, like her, a minor actress of foreign origins who frequently leaves her child in the care of others, though the central episode concerning the film in which mother and daughter co-star seems to be entirely fictional. The character of the mother, however, also contains some elements of the father: she has mysterious origins, multiple names, is heavily involved with the German occupying forces and disappears before ostensibly dying abroad, an event which lends ambiguity to the novel, in which it is not clear if she is alive or dead (p. 19). The transposition of the dead brother into the narrator's dog has already been discussed in the previous chapter, as has the curious *dédoublement* of the whole family in the Valadiers, who mysteriously disappear towards the end of the narrative. Thus *La Petite Bijou*, while clearly autofictional, is characterised to a greater degree than Modiano's previous writing by dispersed identity.

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<sup>72</sup> 'Novelists and their Engagement with History', p. 246.

*La Petite Bijou* differs markedly from *Dora Bruder* in its lesser degree of verisimilitude. Although both novels are set in a geographically recognisable Paris, *La Petite Bijou* contains relatively little factual detail, being devoid of the wealth of administrative material provided in *Dora Bruder*. False names, nicknames and pseudonyms abound and references to Modiano's wider fictional world are present, as in the reference to Rose-Marie, the actress who figures prominently in *Vestiaire de l'enfance*.<sup>73</sup> Thus the atmosphere of *La Petite Bijou* is predominantly fictional in comparison with the documentary-like quality of *Dora Bruder*. The difference in fictional content is clearly related to the author's aims, which are considerably more personal in the later novel: in *La Petite Bijou*, the author engages more fully than before with the figure of the mother. In the most imaginative reworking to date of his troubled childhood, Modiano severely criticises bad parenting, implicitly laying the blame for his brother's death at his parents' door and equating their reprehensible conduct with that of the forces of the Occupation, a message as forceful, if less wide reaching, than that of *Dora Bruder*.

The use made by Modiano of autofiction, then, can be seen to be very variable, as he examines issues of identity in contexts ranging from the intensely personal to the historically significant. Because the world in which he has chosen to explore the self is poised delicately between fact and fiction, it seems to me entirely inappropriate to try to apply too rigid a definition of autofiction to his writing. As we have seen, this results in the exclusion of the majority of his work from a category in which it appears naturally to belong and which the author has endorsed as appropriate to it. The autofictional coherence of the main body of Modiano's work, for which I have argued above, has been thrown into relief by his most recent publication, *Un pedigree* (2005). Although devoid of a rubric, this text is clearly autobiographical, describing the first twenty-one years of the author's life. Significantly, it is different in kind from his previous writing: the narrative is linear, names and dates are unambiguously provided and, for the first time, the death of Modiano's brother is clearly alluded to: 'En février 1957, j'ai perdu mon frère' (p. 44). In this short work, Modiano sheds considerable light on the reasons which led him to embark on his protracted fictional identity quest. At the outset of the book, referring to the troubled circumstances of his birth and upbringing, he declares that 'je ne me suis jamais senti un fils légitime et encore moins un héritier' (p. 9). He then charts the main events of his unhappy childhood and adolescence, up to the point at which he was able to escape into the world of literature. Thus his writing is clearly identified as a search for catharsis through the fictional exploration and renegotiation of this incomplete identity. From a

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<sup>73</sup> See *La Petite Bijou*, p. 65.

psychological point of view, then, *Un pedigree* can be seen as the culmination of the author's identity quest, demonstrating that he has finally been able to come to terms with his troubled past. From a literary point of view, however, the text represents a coda to Modiano's *oeuvre*, providing a retrospective autobiographical account of the background to the author's autofictional search for self. It seems unlikely that having finally crossed the border into autobiography, Modiano will return to the intermediate territory of autofiction.

### Darrieussecq and autofiction

Darrieussecq's relationship with autofiction is most interesting. As we have seen, she endorses the genre strongly, seeing it as contesting the traditional autobiography. Having expressed critical enthusiasm for the genre, however, she keeps her distance from it in her capacity as an author. By setting the majority of her fiction in the near future and by turning quite frequently to fantasy, she seems to be deliberately breaching the condition of *vraisemblance* which she insisted on as a characteristic of autofiction. In addition, the degree of identification between writer and narrator required for autofiction is absent from most of her novels, in which, while the central protagonists are normally young and female, they share few recognisable qualities with their creator. Third-person narrative is frequent and nominal identification is lacking, so that, in spite of some overall coherence provided by the many references to the sea, the Basque country and the death of a child, the identity quest in Darrieussecq's writing lacks a strongly personal focus.

In her most recent novel, *Le Pays*, however, the writer's search for self has become more overtly autobiographical than hitherto. By choosing to write a novel about an author who is writing a book entitled 'Le Pays', Darrieussecq ventures into new territory. For the first time, the main character bears a distinct resemblance to the writer, having a young son who is clearly the child from the autobiographical text, *Le Bébé*. She also shares a first name, Marie, with the author, while her surname, Rivière, evokes the shifting nature of identity which is a central theme of the novel. Why has Darrieussecq abandoned her practice of keeping fiction and autobiography separate in this work? She herself has provided the answer to this question, stating that in *Le Pays* she felt authorised to write about herself for the first time, while at the same time insisting that although the book appears to be autobiographical, this is not the case.<sup>74</sup> To my mind, this places the novel in

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<sup>74</sup> She made these comments in response to a question which I asked her about the difference between *Le Pays* and her previous fiction at a talk given by her as part of the Oxford Literary Festival at the Maison Française in Oxford on March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

the category of autofiction, as the author turns to the middle ground between fact and fiction to explore the nature of the writing and the written selves. As in *L'Amant*, there is frequent alternation between the first and third person in the context of the tension between different representations of identity.

*Le Pays*, then, marks a bold new development in which Darrieussecq, impelled by the imperatives of the identity quest, finally personalises her search for selfhood, a shift in emphasis also in evidence in the work of other young female authors such as Lorette Nobécourt and Christine Angot. In moving towards the autofictional while retaining a fantastic element in the novel, she is simultaneously working on two boundaries: the frontier between autobiography and fiction, and that between realism and fantasy. Clearly, if *Le Pays* is to be regarded as autofictional, doubt must now be cast on the author's previous insistence on verisimilitude as necessary to this genre. In my opinion, the relatively small degree of *invraisemblance* in the novel arising from its setting in the near future does not automatically negate its undecidable status on the boundary between autobiography and fiction. In this context, it must be remembered that Modiano's novels, though more firmly rooted in the here-and-now than Darrieussecq's fiction, are also somewhat lacking in *vraisemblance* because of the author's frequent reliance on coincidence. It seems to me that Darrieussecq's apparent modification of her position as regards verisimilitude should be considered in the light of Todorov's remarks on genre, quoted earlier. Whereas it is all too easy for critics to establish rules when defining genres, truly creative writers are not bound by them but follow their own artistic inspiration. Thus Darrieussecq's compulsion as an author to experiment with genre overrides the limits imposed by her as a critic.

In summary, my chosen authors have all contributed significantly to the development of autofiction, a new and still evolving genre which is clearly attractive to writers exploring identity. Modiano, an early exponent of the genre, has, by creating his own distinctive brand of writing which revolves round the interplay between autobiography and fiction, widened the scope of autofiction. Duras and Darrieussecq, while less reliant on the genre, have also left their mark on it, Duras through her seminal contestation of traditional autobiography in *L'Amant* and Darrieussecq both as a critic and through her recent melding of autofictional and fantastic elements in *Le Pays*. It is noteworthy, too, that all three authors turn increasingly towards the autobiographical as their search for self progresses, suggesting that the postmodern identity quest goes beyond the purely fictional. In Darrieussecq's case, it will be interesting to see whether the personal dimension introduced in *Le Pays* will be retained in her future fiction.



## Marie Darrieussecq's use of the fantastic

While Darrieussecq has made limited use of autofiction to date, she resembles Modiano in having developed a very distinctive use of genre as a vehicle for her exploration of identity in the couple and the family. This involves the original combination of the realistic and the fantastic which serves as a unifying principle in an *oeuvre* which at first sight appears generically diverse. Whereas her novels combine in various proportions elements from mythology and fable, the ghost story, crime fiction, the world of science and science fiction and the travelogue, an underlying unity is imposed by the author's juxtaposition in each work of one or more parallel states of being alongside the everyday world. Thus, like Duras and Modiano, she turns to the borderland between conflicting apprehensions of reality as part of her search for self. It is from the margins to which the alienated self has retreated that new timespaces can be created, enabling the renegotiation of identity. I now wish to examine in some detail Darrieussecq's use of the boundary between the quotidian and the fantastic in the context of her literary investigation of the nature of female selfhood.

Darrieussecq's innovative use of fantasy can be situated firmly in the French tradition of *le fantastique*, in which a strongly subjective element prevails.<sup>75</sup> This French perception of the fantastic, according to Mellier, implies 'une mise en crise du réel, du savoir, de la raison, des identités'.<sup>76</sup> As reality unravels in the wake of the subjective identity crisis, perception becomes distorted and language may break down, so that 'le sujet fantastique fait au coeur du quotidien l'expérience de sa radicale étrangeté'.<sup>77</sup> Fantasy here contains a subversive element, constituting an attack on the bourgeois view of reality. More recently, Bozzetto and Huftier have emphasised the profoundly ambiguous nature of *le fantastique*, a genre which exists on the frontier, 'entre la raison et la folie, entre le dicible et l'indicible, entre la capacité de préhension et l'insaisissable, entre le pensé et l'impensable ...'.<sup>78</sup>

Darrieussecq's preferred location for the identity quest is just such a borderland, an undecidable space which she describes as follows: 'Écrire, c'est être entre deux mondes, là où rien n'est certain mais où tout est possible, où circulent les fluides et les sensations. Le monde de l'imagination, c'est l'entre-deux'.<sup>79</sup> By thus identifying a fluid, intermediate

<sup>75</sup> See Mellier, *La Littérature fantastique*, p. 29, where the author contrasts the Anglo-Saxon 'fantastique de la présence' with the more interiorised 'fantastique de l'indétermination' of French fantasy.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>78</sup> See *Les Frontières du fantastique*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>79</sup> Gaudemar, 'Darrieussecq, du cochon au volatil', p.2.

zone between different worlds, characterised by uncertainty but also inspiring creativity, it seems to me that Darrieussecq has shed considerable light on the process of the interrogation and construction of identity in the *roman indécidable*. She traces her preoccupation with the imaginary to developments in society dating from the 1970s, when 'tout s'est mis à aller de travers, le doute s'est installé et l'imagination s'est libérée'.<sup>80</sup> She also admits to having been profoundly influenced by the dispelling of the Vichy myth together with the revelation of the nature and extent of the Holocaust. Both Duras and Modiano can be seen to have been similarly affected, as is evident from the concern of all three writers with the themes of repressed memory, death and disappearance. All three authors turn to the *entre-deux* to explore these themes, but Darrieussecq alone gives her identity quest a metaphysical dimension by incorporating supernatural elements into her search for self.

What is the nature of Darrieussecq's *entre-deux*? As the author grapples with the question which she has identified as being at the heart of her writing: 'Qu'est-ce qui nous fait humain?',<sup>81</sup> she extends her quest for identity both temporally and spatially, travelling backwards into the realm of mythology, forwards into the future and outwards towards parallel universes. In each of her novels, her protagonists not only operate, as we have already seen, in liminal settings but also find themselves caught between different worlds as the supernatural or fantastic impinges on the here and now. Why does Darrieussecq situate her characters at the juncture between these different spheres? I shall now consider her use of the fantastic in her fiction, first examining her incorporation of mythological elements in her novels before turning to her engagement with the future and her extensive use of parallel worlds.

The writer's use of myth, exemplified in *Truismes*, *Le Mal de mer* and *White* can be seen to embody her desire to extend the frontiers of literature by reinterpreting age-old stories in the light of the very different conditions which prevail in the modern world. Thus a link with the cultural past is preserved, while at the same time new light is shed on the identity quest as myths and fables are imaginatively reshaped, a reinterpretation which may open up ludic and subversive possibilities. The ludic prevails in *Truismes*, a zoomorphic tale based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* which combines a sophisticated examination of female sexual exploitation with a rich vein of comedy, while the subversive is in evidence in *Le Mal de mer*, where the Ulysses myth becomes its mirror image, as the wife flees to the sea, rejecting domesticity. Darrieussecq's use of the Medea myth in *White* is darker in

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<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>81</sup> See Holmes and Miller, 'Entretien exclusif', p.4.

character as, beneath the romantic surface of *White*, Edmée's repeated references to two instances involving the murder of children by their mother, echoed by Peter's allusions to the dislocation caused by war, obliquely evoke the destruction of the Holocaust, linking it with a barbarous past. The couple can be seen as survivors, who, having physically escaped from trauma are nevertheless haunted by repressed memories, represented by the Greek chorus of ghosts who dominate the novel. Darrieussecq, then, makes effective use of myth through the selective reinterpretation in an existential context of tales from the Western Classical tradition, whose incorporation into her fiction add depth to her identity quest, giving it a universal dimension.

Darrieussecq moves forward in time in three of her novels, *Truismes*, *White* and *Le Pays*, which are all situated in the near future. What light does this evocation of an imaginary future throw on the identity quest? Firstly, the author's use of the future in these novels introduces ambiguity, an *entre-deux* between the quotidian present and the unknown future. Whereas these novels appear initially to be set in the present, made recognisable by references to everyday items such as mobile phones, Polaroid cameras, Tupperware, Velcro and Starbucks coffee,<sup>82</sup> this sense of security is perpetually destabilised by the irruption of the future, in which the novels are subsequently revealed to be situated. Secondly, Darrieussecq's presentation of future events in terms of violence and disaster mirrors the inner turmoil of the protagonists as they struggle to define themselves in an uncertain world. This element is particularly prominent in *Truismes*, where the brutal treatment leading to sexual abjection to which the narrator is subjected is echoed in the second half of the novel by the depiction of Paris in the hands of a dictatorial regime, resulting in social dislocation. Thirdly, the author's inclusion of references to imagined future political situations allows her to evoke past conflicts: the war referred to in *White*,<sup>83</sup> which necessitated Peter's evacuation, causing the breakdown of relations with his parents and the death of his sister, has unmistakeable overtones of World War 2, while the conflict in *Truismes* combines elements from the French Revolution, Stalin's purges,<sup>84</sup> the Holocaust<sup>85</sup> and the Vietnam war.<sup>86</sup> In *Le Pays*, the small country's hard-won independence after decades of guerrilla warfare has led to marginalisation rather than to self-realisation.<sup>87</sup> Darrieussecq thus chillingly implies that nothing has been learnt from these struggles and that the death and destruction of war will continue to have a traumatic

<sup>82</sup> See *Truismes*, pp. 65-6, *White*, pp. 23, 103 and *Le Pays*, p. 131.

<sup>83</sup> See *White*, pp. 111-4.

<sup>84</sup> See *Truismes*, p. 124.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>87</sup> See *Le Pays*, pp. 157-8.

effect on individual and collective identity. Nor is scientific progress portrayed in a positive light: the catastrophic failure of the American mission referred to in *White* appears to reflect scepticism on the writer's part as to the effectiveness of technology in resolving human problems, as does the narrator's vision of the nuclear reprocessing plant in *Le Pays* as a giant tumulus.<sup>88</sup> Thus Darrieussecq's evocation of a future characterised by increasing violence and social fragmentation has the quality of an apocalyptic vision, from which the flight towards other universes, symbolised by the magical figures of the *marabout* in *Truismes* and the *youangui* in *Naissance des fantômes*, becomes increasingly attractive.

As regards Darrieussecq's use of parallel worlds, two of these recur throughout her fiction subsequent to *Truismes*: the natural world of the sea and the metaphysical world represented by the author's use of the figure of the ghost. These two realms are closely linked in *Naissance des fantômes*, *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, *White* and *Le Pays*, whereas *Le Mal de mer* contains no overt metaphysical allusions. Can the latter novel then be said to have a fantastic dimension? I consider that it can, in that the author's treatment of the sea in *Le Mal de mer* goes well beyond the realistic, the seaside town in which the novel is set providing an *entre-deux* in which the central protagonists grapple with their identity. I shall therefore examine the role of the sea in this novel before proceeding to analyse the relationship between the sea and the metaphysical in the other four works.

As previously mentioned, the sea in *Le Mal de mer* functions as a Durassian primitive space, to which the mother brings her daughter in the context of an initiation rite. Darrieussecq's powerful and idiosyncratic treatment of the sea in this novel, however, goes considerably further, as the sea is personified by her and endowed with transforming powers, both redemptive and destructive. Thus the sea is depicted at the outset of the novel as 'une bouche' (p. 11), a metaphor which is sustained in further descriptions where it yawns (p. 121) and devours its prey (p. 96). The futures of mother and child are played out on the border between land and sea: 'à l'exacte jointure de la terre et de l'eau' (p. 83), where, in the bright light of the Basque coast, the material world appears to evaporate. As time stands still, the town is described as resembling 'une ville frappée d'un sortilège' (p. 134). In this dreamlike state, the identities of the main protagonists merge as boundaries dissolve. The fall of the cliff into the sea represents both the erosion of these borders and the triumph of the elements over the social world, a victory reflected in the wife's decision, after prolonged immersion in the ocean, to leave suburban domesticity for a new life. Thus in this novel, Darrieussecq, without evoking the metaphysical, nevertheless uses the parallel world of the sea to question the certainties of the everyday world.

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<sup>88</sup> *Le Pays*, p. 195.

In the remaining four novels, Darrieussecq goes considerably further, linking the world of the sea to the beyond. In *Naissance des fantômes*, the deserted wife, seeking to make sense of her husband's inexplicable disappearance, goes to the *entre-deux* of the seashore to seek consolation. The violent nature of the sea is emphasised in this novel: personified, it attacks the narrator: 'la mer m'a giflée en pleine tête' (p. 62), as well as nurturing in its bosom hostile creatures such as the sealions who patrol the mined submarine frontier between warring states, thus reinforcing the theme of destruction. In a work centred round dissolution and rematerialisation, however, the sea has an additional function: the mist and spray generated by it usher in a state of altered consciousness in which the metaphysical replaces the quotidian. It is in this different mode of perception, in which the everyday world dissolves, to be reconstructed in a quantum dimension, that the narrator is finally able to reapprehend her husband and to reincorporate him into her world on her own terms. The novel is thus characterised by slippage, as the narrator oscillates between the metaphysical universe, introduced by the magical figure of the *youangui*, and the day-to-day world, represented by the down-to-earth figure of Jacqueline, her bourgeois friend. In a striking scene linking the marine with the metaphysical, the narrator becomes a shark, swimming around her submerged family home and threatening its inhabitants, including Jacqueline (pp. 135-7). As in *Le Mal de mer*, conventional domesticity is seen as standing in the way of the identity quest.

In *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, the connection between the sea and the metaphysical is considerable more straightforward: the child who was drowned in the sea returns as a ghost. The sea's destructive power is again emphasised, as the drowned child is transformed by the sea and returned in a state which traumatises his family, leading to its disintegration. The sea, however, not only destroys but attracts: the mother continues to live close to it while Nore, unaware of the family tragedy, is fascinated by the sea to the point of obsession, intuitively apprehending its importance in her family history: 'Dans une vie antérieure j'étais peut-être requin blanc, et un dauphin m'a fait exploser le ventre d'un seul coup de bec' (p. 117). As in *Naissance des fantômes*, the marine and the metaphysical are linked in a dreamlike episode where the mother perceives herself as a seagull overflying the sea which has claimed her child (pp. 83-6). Thus the novel is pervaded both by the sea and by the phantom presence of its young victim. In contrast, the link between the sea and the fantastic in *White* is less personal but implicit in the novel's title: the ghosts here are connected with the sea in that they are emanations of the natural world, formed from the recomposition of the elements in the freezing conditions of the Antarctic, where sea, air and land merge into insubstantial whiteness.

The sea in *Le Pays* is an all-pervasive presence with both benign and malign powers: while the coast is described as an 'endroit béni' (p. 101), the narrator's mother, whose house overlooks the sea, warns her daughter that 'la mer toute la journée rend fou' (p. 91). The linked themes of immersion and submersion recur, the latter being connected to the supernatural: Marie conjures up her brother's ghost in a Eurostar train going through the Channel tunnel, so that the apparition takes place 'sous la mer' (p. 243). Immersion is linked with the creative process, as swimming, like running and writing, is described as leading to 'l'absence à soi-même, l'accès au monde sans le je' (p. 179, author's italics). As in *Le Mal de mer*, the sea is perceived as an exteriorisation of the self in which 'le moi devient une grande béance pleine d'eau salée' (p. 99). Thus the sea plays an important part in this complex novel, in which the exploration of creativity and the search for family identity are combined.

Darrieussecq, then, uses the *entre-deux* creatively as a vehicle for exploring the complexity of the identity quest in the modern world. As we have seen, she makes sustained use of the metaphysical in this context, introducing the figure of the ghost into four of her novels: *Naissance des fantômes*, *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, *White* and *Le Pays*. Darrieussecq's treatment of the ghost is eclectic in that she draws on a different tradition in each of the first three of these novels: the ghost in *Naissance des fantômes* is resolutely postmodern, envisaged in the context of a quantum universe, while that in *Bref séjour chez les vivants* is closer to the conventional model and the ghostly chorus which dominates *White* derives from a fusion of Classical mythology and local folk legend. In her latest novel, *Le Pays*, she combines the ghosts of the two previous works, retaining a residual ghostly chorus alongside the ghost of a dead person. These apparently dissimilar articulations of the ghost are however, linked by a common theme, that of the author's concern with non-communication, in which ghosts represent the silence at the heart of the family: 'Ils naissent du secret, du non-dit, du silence'. Ghosts, like words, have a virtual existence in the shadowy space between sensation and expression: 'Les fantômes et les mots. Les mots sont dans cet espace indéterminé entre ce que l'on sent et ce que l'on veut nommer. Les mots sont des fantômes entre deux phrases'.<sup>89</sup> The writer envisages her mission as exploring this territory and giving a voice to the phantoms which reside there: 'Écrire, c'est donner voix aux fantômes'.<sup>90</sup> The figure of the ghost, therefore, plays a significant part in Darrieussecq's exploration of identity, linking two major themes, that of the lack of communication within the family and that of disappearance and death. Her use

<sup>89</sup> See Gaudemar, 'Darrieussecq, du cochon au volatil', p. 2.

<sup>90</sup> See Holmes and Miller, 'Entretien exclusif'.

of the symbol of the ghost can be seen as both innovative and subversive: her contrasting depictions of this figure have little in common with the fear-inspiring phantom of tradition but can be seen as metaphorical expressions of the *non-dit* at the heart of the identity crisis. I therefore propose to examine Darrieussecq's four successive reworkings of the figure of the ghost in a little more detail, assessing the significance of this symbol in each novel as well as considering the developing role of the ghost in the writer's fiction.

*Naissance des fantômes* is a generic tour de force in that it appears at the outset to be a detective novel but gradually metamorphoses into an undecidable postmodern ghost story, thus subverting convention and upsetting the reader's expectations. Darrieussecq's use of the ghost in this work is highly original: she breaks with tradition by introducing a ghost who represents the translation of a living person into another dimension rather than the reappearance of someone who has died. Thus the ghost in this novel symbolises the reduction of the husband from a real but threatening figure to a virtual but benign presence, so that the wife, having been reduced by him to a shadow, reduces him to a shadow in her turn. The metaphorical quality of the ghost figure is made clear early in the novel through the connection between the wife's admission of 'la mauvaise qualité de notre amour' (p. 32) and the husband's subsequent evocation as a phantom who disappears from their wedding photographs, and is sustained throughout the book, as the *non-dit* at the heart of the relationship leads first to the husband's dematerialisation and subsequently to his reappearance in a parallel universe. In the interim, the formerly subservient wife oscillates between the comfortable material world, to which she has become accustomed, and a new, non-material state of being with which she must engage in order to redefine her identity. It is only when she finally accepts separation from a dominant partner that she is able to enter this 'nouvel espace-temps' (p. 44), in which he, paradoxically, reappears as a ghostly presence. This reappearance is portrayed as reassuring rather than threatening, endorsing the wife's new existence as an autonomous being: 'Mon mari, copiant les morts, allait me faire signe et me rendre à l'existence' (p. 96). As the wife's self-confidence increases, the husband's ghost appears more frequently until, at the end of the novel, she is able to accept his virtual presence back into her life before letting him go and pursuing an independent career as a writer. Darrieussecq's use of the figure of ghost in this novel, therefore, has a positive dimension, symbolising her rejection of *l'amour fusion*: the husband, reduced to the ghostly state, is no longer able to impede his wife's self-development. The extended metaphor is strikingly original, as, eschewing a more conventional psychological examination of her protagonist's state of mind, she turns to the sphere of quantum physics to illuminate her exploration of the feminine psyche. This submicroscopic world of

elementary particles is characterised by flux, as particles oscillate between two different states, a duality in which the outside observer is implicated. As we have seen, Darrieussecq invokes the boundary between sea and land, where the elements mingle, to reinforce her depiction of the wife's reapprehension of the universe at the subatomic level, symbolising the start of a radically new mode of existence.

The figure of the ghost in *Bref séjour chez les vivants* differs significantly from that in *Naissance des fantômes* in that, following tradition, it represents a dead person, the drowned child, whose accidental death has traumatised his family. The ghost appears only once in the novel and, as opposed to the ghost alluded to above, conforms to the conventional stereotype, being described as 'une ombre à la fenêtre' (p. 280) and 'un nez écrasé au carreau, la trace d'une bouche ouverte' (p. 283), who calls out to his sister: 'on l'a appelée. Elle a entendu son nom, Nore' (p. 284). Ironically, however, Nore is the only member of the family who is unaware of her brother's existence, which has been concealed from her, so that the ghost becomes the symbol of the *non-dit*. The remaining family members, trying vainly to suppress the memory of the lost child, are haunted by him in different ways: Anne, driven to the brink of madness by the tragedy, perceives herself to be caught up in a parallel universe, run by aliens, who have already recruited her dead brother (p. 127), Jeanne, having fled to Argentina to escape the consequences of a tragedy for which she feels responsible, is constantly reminded of it by the plight of the *desaparecidos*, as well as by recurrent nightmares (pp. 86-9), while the mother, busying herself with household tasks, is unable to banish from her mind the image of her child's washed-up corpse (pp. 195-6). Throughout the novel, the child's haunting presence is also evoked by Darrieussecq's frequent use of elements from the fairy tale, which maintain the prominence of the theme of lost childhood. The retelling of the story of the king who lost his memory (p. 59) has a clear link with the symbolic use of the ghost, while repeated mentions of the fable of the hermit crab, forced to forsake its shell for the perils of the ocean (pp. 58, 252), invoke the vulnerability of the individual who embarks on the search for self. At the end of the novel, Darrieussecq introduces a rather different use of the ghost, drawing on Classical sources to invoke the vengeful spirit of the child, who lures Jeanne to a fate similar to the one inflicted on him: 'tu sais bien qu'il t'attend dans le fond tu sais bien qu'il t'attend couvert de vase hilare c'est écrit depuis longtemps tu le savais ça devait arriver' (p. 301). Thus the power of the *non-dit* reasserts itself, engulfing the family in further tragedy. The ghost in this novel, therefore, represents the negative and destructive forces unleashed by repressed memory and non-communication, as well as invoking the horror of the death of a child, one of Darrieussecq's major preoccupations.



In *White*, Darrieussecq's fifth novel, the role of the ghost is considerably expanded and given a ludic dimension. The ghosts in this novel are pluralised in a modern version of the Greek chorus and also spring from the author's interest in the myths which situate the origins of the ghost at the South Pole: 'Plusieurs mythologies nous localisent ici' (p. 55). They thus differ significantly from the figure of the ghost in the two novels referred to above, while retaining some affinity with them. Like the ghost in *Naissance des fantômes*, they exist in a timeless state of suspension, 'dans cette vacuité de l'espace entre-deux' (p. 168) and are conjured up by natural phenomena: 'les mirages leur donnent corps' (p. 145). The link with repressed memory, established in *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, is further developed in *White*, as the ghosts establish themselves as the custodians of memory in a hostile environment: 'la dérive des continents mentaux est notre affaire' (p. 64). Peter and Edmée, who have fled to the Antarctic to escape from traumatic past events, are constantly reminded of these unwanted memories by the ubiquitous presence of the ghostly chorus. The theme of repressed memory remains strongly present, as Peter's dead sister, aided by the ghosts, reappears at the climax of the novel both as a voice and a shape (pp. 154-5), while other ghosts of the past are represented by references to the ghosts of Scott, Amundsen and Shackleton, which haunt the area (pp. 185-6). The ghosts in *White*, then, are linked to Darrieussecq's previous treatments of the figure, retaining the connection with the *non-dit*: 'Le silence fait naître les fantômes' (p. 145). Ghosts, however, play a much more active part in *White* than in the two previous novels, taking on a first-person narrative role as 'nous, les fantômes' (p. 50) and, in their capacity as a Greek chorus, commenting on the conduct of the protagonists and informing the reader about future developments in the plot: 'Nous seuls dévancions les événements' (p. 57). They are also endowed with the mischievous and occasionally malevolent qualities of elves, being described on one occasion as 'le poulailler des fantômes, criaillant et blackboulés' (p. 194). The connection with natural and meteorological phenomena noted in *Naissance des fantômes* is greatly enhanced, as the ghosts serve to symbolise the hostile quality of the Antarctic environment, where visual and auditory hallucinations abound: the novel is punctuated by references to sounds and dominated by the colour white. As in *Naissance des fantômes*, Darrieussecq displays an innovative approach to the fantastic in *White*, as she reinvents the ghost in an unusual setting. Arguably, however, by giving the ghosts in this novel a narrative role with comical overtones as well as using them to represent repressed memory, she has overloaded the symbol of the ghost, rendering it less persuasive than in her earlier works.

In her most recent novel, *Le Pays*, Darrieussecq remedies this defect by restricting the role of the ghost: though all-pervasive, the ghosts in this story are not intrusive but

remain firmly in the background. The protagonist, who leaves Paris and returns to the country of her birth to rediscover her roots, becomes increasingly aware of ghostly presences in her new surroundings, which are strongly evocative of the past: 'Embruns aux vitres, pollens, elle voyait, dans la journée aussi, plus de fantômes qu'à Paris' (p. 19). In this autofictional novel, in which Darrieussecq, in a *mise en abyme*, describes an author writing a book entitled 'Le Pays', the writing process is described in terms of receptiveness to the ghosts of the past: 'Il se trouve qu'écrire vous tient à une table, dans une grande disponibilité aux fantômes' (p. 83). Grafted onto this attenuated use of a ghostly chorus is a second use of the ghost, similar to that in *Bref séjour chez les vivants*. This concerns the conjuring up by the narrator of the ghost of her dead brother. Thus both novels are gradually revealed to be centred on the theme of the loss of a sibling. Whereas, however, Nore in the earlier novel intuitively apprehends the brother whose existence has been concealed from her, the narrator in *Le Pays*, aware of the death of a brother in infancy, deliberately sets out to recreate him. In the face of a complete lack of evidence as to his existence, she wills his reappearance: 'Quelque chose que je portais depuis longtemps, une impression profonde, la forme en creux d'un disparu, allait projeter dans l'espace une sorte de corps' (p. 236). The voluntary nature of this apparition is underlined by the fact that it is repeatedly announced beforehand: 'Dans trois petites heures j'allais rencontrer mon frère, Paul Rivière, celui qui est mort' (p. 241).<sup>91</sup> Significantly, the ghost appears in the border zone of the Channel tunnel, halfway between England and France, where the narrator projects her brother's identity onto a total stranger sitting close to her on the Eurostar: 'Je savais que c'était mon frère' (p. 243). Thus she endows her lost brother with the identity of which he has been deprived by his parents' refusal to commemorate his existence.

Having combined in this novel two uses of the ghost, the ghost as a background presence representing memory and the ghost as the reincarnation of a dead person, Darrieussecq ends the novel on a theoretical note, expounding her concept of the ghost more fully than in her previous novels. Describing how her heroine, in the throes of childhood, is given pain relief on a scale from nought to ten, she applies this graduation to her fluctuating belief in ghosts:

« Croyez-vous aux fantômes? » Il aurait fallu répondre de même, en termes d'échelle. Elle y croyait de zéro à dix, ça dépendait de l'angoisse et du chagrin, ça dépendait des moments et des pays, des livres et des gens, du jour ou de la nuit.

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<sup>91</sup> See also pp. 238 and 242.

Les fantômes ne rodent pas dans les limbes. Ils n'existent que dans la rencontre. Ils n'ont d'autre lieu que leur apparition. Quand ils disparaissent, c'est totalement. Ils n'ont pas de vie intérieure, ils n'ont pas de vie quelque part, ils n'ont ni psychologie ni mémoire. Ils ne souffrent pas. Ils naissent de notre hantise, qui les allume et les éteint, oscillants, pauvres chandelles. Ils ne sont que pour nous (p. 297).

Ghosts, then, in Darrieussecq's fiction, are clearly constructs, which can be conjured up at will and banished just as easily, as a child exorcises nighttime terrors with a flick of the light switch.<sup>92</sup> In the context of the identity quest, however, it is to this shadowy realm between reality and fantasy that the subject must return in order to come to terms with the *non-dit* of the past and renegotiate the self.

## The detective story

As well as using the interface between genres to explore identity, my chosen authors also display an eclectic attitude towards genre, incorporating into their novels material from a number of different sources including crime fiction. Why do my chosen authors turn to the detective story in their exploration of identity? Several factors can be seen to underlie their predilection for borrowing from this genre. As we have seen, Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq all write from a marginalised position. Each author creates protagonists whose alienation is linked to transgression, a concept which encompasses the idea of crime. Crime, then, can be used in the context of the exploration of the marginalised self as a metaphor for the transgression at the heart of the identity quest. Additionally, the twilight world on the fringes of society which provides the setting for much crime fiction appeals to authors such as Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq, who envisage the search for self as taking place in a liminal environment. Clearly, too, the element of quest inherent in detective fiction makes it attractive to writers whose main objective is the search for self. As regards the *enquête* which is central to the crime novel, however, subversive possibilities arise. The set formula of the conventional crime story, with its clear narrative framework in which a mystery is resolved by means of clues, lays itself open to ludic and parodic exploitation. By incorporating elements from the *enquête* into their fiction, authors of *récits indécidables* such as Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq underline the contrast between their more sophisticated, innovative and open-ended approach to fiction and the clichés of a well-worn tradition. I shall structure my discussion of my selected writers'

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<sup>92</sup> See *Naissance des fantômes*, p. 42.

incorporation of elements from the detective story into their novels round the factors identified above, examining their borrowings from this genre under two headings: crime and the criminal milieu, and *quête* and *enquête*. Before doing so, I shall provide a brief description of the traditional detective story in order to clarify the nature and extent of my chosen authors' use of material from crime fiction.

A relatively new genre which developed simultaneously in France, Great Britain and America, crime fiction gradually developed rules, so that the classical detective novel, used as a model by my chosen authors, is characterised by its adherence to a set of conventions.<sup>93</sup> Although, as Todorov has pointed out,<sup>94</sup> these rules have been the subject of considerable discussion, it is possible to isolate certain characteristics shared by all traditional crime fiction: there must be at least one crime, one suspect and one detective. Narrative closure incorporating a rational explanation for the crime is also a requirement. Thus the mode of construction of the conventional *roman policier* can be envisaged in terms of a kit, in which the novel is assembled from pre-selected components.<sup>95</sup> Another noteworthy development concerns the genre's fission into several subgenres, of which four are generally recognised: the whodunit or *roman à énigme*, the thriller or *roman noir*, the suspense thriller or *roman à suspense* and the *roman d'investigation* or detective thriller.<sup>96</sup>

The detective story is still developing as a genre, losing its traditional rigidity and opening itself up to experimentation. Martin Priestman emphasises the permeability which exists both between the subgenres of crime fiction and between the *roman policier* and the modern novel, concluding, pertinently, that 'many interesting works and developments have sprung from the transgression or at least pushing-back of such generic boundaries, either out of dissatisfaction with their current limits or out of a more ludic urge to make the reader aware of their artificiality as cultural constructions'.<sup>97</sup> Jacques Dubois acknowledges the important part played by crime fiction in the development of the modern novel, involving the introduction of new elements which have reinvigorated the latter form: 'le roman novateur dans sa version la plus reconnue a, au fil du temps, emprunté de plus en plus à la forme policière, fût-ce pour en détourner, comme on l'a vu, les intentions et les fins'.<sup>98</sup> I shall now discuss the extent to which the novels of Duras, Modiano and

<sup>93</sup> As listed by S. S. Van Dine in 'Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories', *The American Magazine*, September 1928.

<sup>94</sup> *Poétique de la prose*, p. 62.

<sup>95</sup> See Jacques Dubois, *Le Roman policier ou la modernité* (Paris: Éditions Nathan, 1992), p. 50.

<sup>96</sup> Todorov, Dubois and Priestman concur as to the first three; Dubois and Priestman, writing more recently than Todorov, add the fourth category.

<sup>97</sup> *Crime Fiction from Poe to the Present*, p. 62.

<sup>98</sup> *Le Roman policier ou la modernité*, p. 83.

Darrieussecq exemplify this trend towards subversive borrowing from the detective story in the context of the search for self.

### **Crime and a criminal milieu**

Although my selected writers all perceive the identity quest as transgressive, their use of crime and a criminal milieu in the context of this transgression is variable. Modiano draws heavily on the detective story in his fiction, situating all his novels on the fringes of the criminal world, while Duras and Darrieussecq borrow less frequently from the genre: crime plays a prominent part in four of Duras's major novels and has a less significant role in three of Darrieussecq's works. The considerable variation in the extent of their borrowing from the genre is linked to each author's different perception of the nature of crime and its relevance to the identity quest.

Transgression lies at the heart of Modiano's work, leading to marginalisation. Central to his fictional exploration of identity is the father's crime, involving collaboration and black-market dealings during the Occupation. This criminal behaviour is depicted by Modiano as an original sin which has cut off the son from his roots, banishing him to a limbo from which the only escape lies in a reassessment of this past transgression. Thus the author's choice of setting has a clear metaphorical dimension, in which the small-time criminals who invariably surround the protagonist and sometimes lure him into crime represent the collaborators with whom the father was heavily involved. The effects of Modiano's use of this crime-ridden milieu are twofold. Firstly, by representing him as trapped in a replication, albeit attenuated, of his father's situation, the author underlines the gravity of the son's predicament, emphasising the nefarious effects of the father's transgression on the next generation. Secondly, by substituting petty crime for the transgressions of the Occupation, Modiano creates a connection between past and present events, allowing the former to be examined in terms of the latter by summoning up the morally dubious world of the Vichy era through coded references while remaining in another period, usually that of the 1960s. In *Remise de peine*, for example, having associated the collaborator Eddy Pagnon, shot at the Liberation with other members of the 'bande de la rue Lauriston', with shady black-market transactions involving garages (pp. 117-121), Modiano is able to conjure up this world instantly by means of subsequent allusions to garages. Similarly, in *Vestiaire de l'enfance*, the narrator's admission that he has fled abroad to escape being charged in connection with a car accident in which he abandoned his passenger is identifiable as a veiled reference to involvement with the Vichy

regime (p. 51). Thus, by using minor transgression as a shorthand for the events of the Occupation, the author links the two main periods in which his identity quest is set, allowing him to move freely between these periods and thus extending the scope of his search for self.

Duras's conception of crime, while differing significantly from that of Modiano, is also closely linked to the notion of transgression and has a symbolic dimension. Transgression is central to the author's literary identity quest, in which immersion in a transgressive act is the catalyst by means of which the main protagonists detach themselves from their bourgeois surroundings and are drawn into a radically new mode of existence. Violence and symbolic death are key components of this transgressive experience, which is normally depicted by Duras in terms of the sexual encounter. In four of her novels, however, the writer, who was fascinated by violent crime, uses murder to represent the highly-charged emotional event at the heart of the identity quest. Two of these works, *Moderato cantabile* and *Dix heures et demie du soir en été* are centred on a *crime passionnel*, while a gratuitous killing is the subject of *L'Amante anglaise* and the shooting of lepers by the eponymous hero is invested with considerable significance in *Le Vice-consul*. The link between murder and sexual transgression is explicit in the first two novels. The killing of a young woman by her lover in *Moderato cantabile* leads to the involvement of Anne Desbaresdes and Chauvin in a re-enactment of this event which causes Anne to forsake her comfortable bourgeois home for the sleazy milieu of a dockland bar. *Dix heures et demie du soir en été*, set in Spain, opens with the murder by a jealous husband of his adulterous wife and her lover. The murderer is subsequently aided and abetted in his flight from justice by a stranger, Maria, who uses this activity to distract herself from her husband's impending infidelity with a younger woman, Claire, who has accompanied them on holiday. The connection between violent crime and sexual desire is made very clear in *Dix heures et demie du soir en été*, where the book's title refers to the moment at which Maria not only first witnesses her husband, Pierre, embracing Claire but simultaneously becomes aware of the presence of the fugitive murderer, Rodrigo, hiding on a nearby rooftop. The connection between sexual passion and crime is further reinforced by the powerful thunderstorm raging outside, which symbolises the highly-charged emotions aroused in both circumstances (pp. 42-3). The two later novels differ in that murder is not conceived of in such overtly sexual terms but is portrayed as inevitable, inexplicable and life changing. In *Le Vice-consul*, Jean Marc de H.'s crime symbolises the transformation of his identity as a consequence of his exposure to the poverty of India, while the murder of her cousin by Claire Lannes in *L'Amante anglaise* is conceived of in terms of madness

initiated by a failed relationship and exacerbated by the protagonist's domestic situation. Duras's idiosyncratic view of murder leads her to sympathise with the perpetrators of crime rather than its victims: as Adler observes, 'Ce n'est pas dans le camp de la victime qu'elle se situe mais dans celui qui commet l'acte'.<sup>99</sup> Thus her borrowing from crime fiction diverges from the accepted conventions of the detective story, in which murder must be avenged, but has overtones of amorality and violence which link it with the *roman noir* and the *roman d'investigation*.

Darrieussecq's references to crime in her novels are slight. Both *Truismes* and *Naissance des fantômes* are situated in environments where law and order has broken down and crime appears to be sanctioned by the state: in the former, the Pont-Neuf has been destroyed after a military coup and armed gangs of vigilantes patrol Paris, while in the latter, the small state in which the story is set is heavily protected from imminent attack by blockhouses and mines. There are clear allusions to the Holocaust in *Truismes*, where the pig farm run by the protagonist's mother represents a concentration camp, so that the daughter's murder of her mother becomes a legitimate act of self-defence. The author's use of a violent milieu as a background in these two novels, both of which are set in the future, seems to represent a bleak vision on the author's part, in which the crimes of the past, silenced by the *non-dit*, will reassert themselves. Her portrayal of the perpetrators of violence as male also seems to constitute an attack on the oppressive nature of patriarchy. Only one of her novels, *Le Mal de mer*, revolves round a crime, the abduction by a mother of her child from the family home. As in the case of Duras, the writer's sympathies lie with the perpetrator rather than the victim in this novel, in which, however, the criminal element of the story is subordinated to the dominant theme of the identity quest. I shall return to this work in the context of the tension between *quête* and *enquête*, to which I shall now turn my attention.

### *Quête and enquête*

The relationship between the *quête* and the *enquête* is central to Modiano's fiction. As Jean-Claude Joye has noted, the author makes extensive use of a format which has affinities with that of the detective story: 'la forme que Modiano a le plus souvent mimée jusqu'aujourd'hui est ... celle du roman policier ou du roman d'espionnage'.<sup>100</sup> This borrowing, however, is far from straightforward, being intimately associated with the

<sup>99</sup> Marguerite Duras, p. 414.

<sup>100</sup> Jean-Claude Joye, *Littérature immédiate: Cinq études sur Jeanne Bourin, Julien Green, Patrick Modiano, Yves Navarre, Françoise Sagan* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1990), p. 90, author's italics.

writer's metaphorical use of crime, as discussed above. Whereas the search for self through the reassessment of the past clearly necessitates a quest similar to that found in crime fiction, the ready solutions characteristic of the genre are not easily applicable to the far more complicated area of the exploration of identity. Thus, while drawing heavily on the structure of the *roman à énigme*, which revolves round the retrospective examination of a past mystery by means of clues, Modiano emphasises the importance of the *quête* but at the same time undermines the *enquête*.

The complexity of Modiano's overall aims, then, entails divergences on his part from the accepted practice of this genre, many of which have been highlighted by Akane Kawakami, whose perceptive comments on Modiano's playful use of the detective story I shall now summarise. As she observes: 'in many (although not all) of Modiano's novels, the "mystery" concerns the narrator himself'.<sup>101</sup> This is at variance with the conventions of the whodunit, where the detective is rarely implicated directly in the crime. Kawakami also stresses the incongruity of a first-person narrator in the context of a quest for his own past: 'How is such a quest justifiable, when a first-person narrator should surely have full access to his own past?'<sup>102</sup> In fact, the whodunit rarely has a first-person narrator for this very reason and where one exists, this person is usually the helper or the confidante of the detective rather than the detective himself. Another departure from the norm concerns Modiano's use of clues. Whereas the clues provided in the traditional *roman à énigme* are small in number but significant, Modiano presents the reader with a wealth of evidence, much of which is irrelevant if not downright misleading.<sup>103</sup> Kawakami also stresses the lack of organisational ability on the part of Modiano's narrator together with Modiano's confusing use of names as divergences from the accepted conventions of crime fiction.<sup>104</sup> These considerations have led Kawakami to see Modiano's use of elements from the detective story as ludic and parodic: 'Modiano's novels bear a playful relation to detective fiction in that they are built around the conventions of this subgenre and raise the reader's expectations accordingly, but always fail to fulfil them'.<sup>105</sup> The element of quest is stronger and more personal than in the detective story, while the *enquête* is subverted and narrative closure is eschewed. An examination of the two novels which are most clearly modelled on crime fiction, *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* and *Quartier perdu*, will help to shed more light on the nature of Modiano's borrowing from this genre.

<sup>101</sup> *A Self-conscious Art*, p. 101.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 95-6.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96-7.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.



*Rue des Boutiques Obscures* has been described by Jeanne Ewert as a 'pure antidetective novel' because of the degree to which it subverts the conventions of crime fiction, on which Modiano draws heavily in this novel.<sup>106</sup> The story opens in the offices of a private detective who is a friend of the narrator and whom the latter has approached in an attempt to elucidate a mystery. Although the detective is about to retire, he gives his friend useful advice as to how to proceed. The narrator then sets out to solve the mystery himself by sifting through a mass of evidence, some of which is provided by the detective, who continues to give help and encouragement from his place of retirement. Thus the structure of the novel is similar to that of a *roman à énigme*.

There are, however, very significant differences between *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* and a conventional murder mystery. Firstly, there is no crime, the mystery which requires elucidation being that of the narrator's identity which he has lost since being struck by amnesia ten years previously. Secondly, as hinted at in the title, the mystery is not resolved: although the narrator partially recovers his memory, his complicated past is not fully elucidated and his identity remains uncertain. Thus the narrative closure which is a prerequisite of the detective story is not achieved. *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*' superficial resemblance to a whodunit or amnesia thriller is therefore misleading, as the scope of the novel is considerably wider than that of a work of crime fiction. Guy Roland's attempt to discover his true identity can be seen to represent the need for a generation cut off from its past to re-examine past events, however complex or unpleasant this may prove to be. Only after doing this will engagement with the present become possible.

In this novel, then, Modiano can be seen to be adapting conventions from crime fiction for purposes which far exceed the limited scope of this genre. In order to emphasise the gulf between his aims and those of the writer of detective stories, he introduces deliberate parody, such as the provision of a multiplicity of purported clues which in fact lead nowhere: the references to Russians which abound in the story and give it overtones of the spy thriller prove to be a red herring. For Kawakami, this proliferation of evidence leads to an 'effet d'irréel' which has precisely the opposite effect of that sought by writers of crime fiction: reality does not prevail but recedes in a welter of detail.<sup>107</sup> Ludic references to crime fiction occur at several points in the text: Denise Coudreuse is described as an avid reader of *romans policiers* (p. 220), while the detective Hutte prefers to abandon his career in favour of a job as a librarian (p. 175). Here Modiano appears to be

<sup>106</sup> Jeanne Ewert, 'Lost in the Hermeneutic Funhouse: Patrick Modiano's Postmodern Detective' in Ronald Walker and June Frazer (eds.), *The Cunning Craft: Original Essays on Detective Fiction and Contemporary Literary Theory* (Macomb, IL: Western Illinois University Press, 1990) pp. 166-93 (p. 167).

<sup>107</sup> *A Self-conscious Art*, pp. 97-8.

implicitly emphasising the superiority of his type of writing as compared to the more popular genre of the detective story.

In *Quartier perdu*, published six years later, in 1984, Modiano's references to crime fiction are even more overt than in the earlier novel. The narrator, a writer of detective fiction who left Paris twenty years previously in mysterious circumstances, returns in an attempt to recover his lost past. There is obvious *mise en abyme* here as Modiano, himself a famous author, though not of crime fiction, writes about a famous thriller writer who resembles him in many respects: both are tall (p. 85), have a mother who was a chorus girl (p. 21) and share the same age and birthplace (p. 54). Unlike *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*, *Quartier perdu* does have a murder at the heart of the mystery of Ambrose Guise's past, but here, as elsewhere in the novel, a parodic element is present: Morris has pointed out that the name of the victim, Ludo, reinforces Modiano's playful intentions as regards his use of crime fiction.<sup>108</sup> The very frequent references to the genre which punctuate the text reinforce this view: the advice given to the narrator by his friend Rocroy can be seen as a sly comment by Modiano on the worth of detective fiction:

Vous restez d'un bout à l'autre de votre livre dans le « registre policier », mais l'on sent, à certains passages, que si vous vous donniez un peu plus de mal, vous pourriez vraiment faire œuvre littéraire. En tout cas, vous avez la gentillesse d'aider de pauvres gens comme moi à passer leurs nuits d'insomnie, et c'est déjà beaucoup (p. 31).

As in *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*, the central theme of *Quartier perdu* is the exploration of the author's identity through the rediscovery of his forgotten past, a quest which is referred to repeatedly as 'un pèlerinage' (pp. 22, 25, 75). This search for self, rather than the elucidation of the crime which led to the author's leaving France, is at the heart of the novel. As in the earlier novel, narrative closure is not achieved: it is not clear at the end of the book whether Ambrose Guise returns to his English wife or rejoins a former French girlfriend, resuming his previous identity as Jean Dekker. Modiano, however, skilfully interweaves ludic references to crime fiction into this more serious theme of identity, as when the narrator comments: 'j'ai repéré sur les rayonnages de la bibliothèque trois de mes livres, les trois premiers *Jarvis*. Cela m'a rassuré, car je finissais par ne plus très bien savoir qui j'étais' (p. 52). This novel, then, can be seen to pay playful tribute to a genre from which Modiano has borrowed those elements which fit his purpose. He has, after all, gained a wide readership through making his serious and far-reaching message accessible

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<sup>108</sup> Patrick Modiano (2000), p. 107.

by his use of a prose style which is reminiscent of the *roman à énigme* in its clarity. While he undoubtedly adapts and subverts the conventions of crime fiction, the structure of his novels provides an initially recognisable framework for the reader familiar with this genre. Modiano's preoccupations as a writer, however, go far beyond the limited aims of the crime fiction writer, entailing active co-operation on the part of the reader in order to decode the author's underlying message.

In his least fictional exploration of identity, *Dora Bruder*, Modiano's use of the *enquête* differs from his normal pattern. In this work, he sublimates his search for self, identifying himself with a real Holocaust survivor, whose memory he seeks to perpetuate. As with his other fiction, quest is at the heart of this novel, which revolves round the painstaking recreation of the events of Dora's life prior to her deportation. Significantly, however, this work does not contain the large amount of irrelevant detail which characterises Modiano's other novels, nor are there many red herrings. Although many aspects of Dora's life remain mysterious, the narrator accumulates sufficient evidence to constitute a damning indictment of the connivance of the Vichy authorities in the deportation of the Jews. *Dora Bruder*, then, can be read as an *enquête* into the conduct of the French police responsible for Dora's death, written with the aim of exposing a hidden crime. In order to achieve this aim, Modiano adheres more closely to the conventions of crime fiction than in the remainder of his *oeuvre*, where, as we have seen, his treatment of the *enquête* is subversive.

The tension between *quête* and *enquête* which characterises Modiano's fiction is largely absent from Duras's writing. Like Modiano, however, her use of the detective story format has a ludic dimension. The experimentation with genre and form characteristic of the *nouveau roman* can be discerned in *Moderato cantabile*, where Duras plays with the classical detective story in a manner reminiscent of *nouveaux romanciers*, such as Robbe-Grillet and Butor. Like the *roman à énigme*, the novel revolves round a murder, is tightly structured and embodies circularity as the murder is constantly re-examined. Unlike the conventional whodunit, however, almost nothing is revealed: as Gaëtan Picon comments on the story: 'Nous ne retenons que sa courbe mélancolique: admirable structure d'un récit absent'.<sup>109</sup> A crucial difference from the accepted conventions of the whodunit lies in the fact that the murderer's identity is clear from the outset. Thus the element of *enquête* is missing from the novel, as there is no mystery to be solved concerning the events of the crime and no trail of clues to be followed. The reader's attention, therefore, is not focused

<sup>109</sup> Gaëtan Picon, '« Moderato cantabile » dans l'oeuvre de Marguerite Duras', *Mercure de France*, June 1958.

on discovering exactly what happened but rather on coming to terms with the inexplicable, as Madeleine Alleins has observed: 'Ce livre ne nous permet pas de nous laisser glisser de geste en geste, d'événement en événement; avec lui nous sommes forcés de constater l'inconnu, qui est peut-être, qui demeurera peut-être l'inconnaissable'.<sup>110</sup> The circularity referred to above is radically different in nature from that of the whodunit, as it does not signify narrative closure but an obsessive re-enactment of a highly-charged event, immersion in which is integral to the search for self. Thus, although Duras borrows some elements from the *roman à énigme* in this novel, her use of conventions from crime fiction can be seen as subversive: she refuses to provide a satisfactory explanation for the crime, but uses it as a springboard for the exploration of the nature of the female self which is central to her writing. Similarly, in *Dix heures et demie du soir en été*, there is no mystery as to the perpetrator of the crime, whose identity is revealed on the first page of the novel. The element of *enquête*, therefore, is yet again entirely absent, as the crime at the outset of the novel is not re-examined. The influence of the *roman d'investigation* is detectable in the fast-moving action of the novel and its atmosphere of suspense as the heroine, Maria, races against time to save the murderer from the police who are hunting him. Her empathy with the murderer and strong dislike for the police also give this novel an anti-detective flavour. The criminal element, however, is not the dominant theme of the novel but is subordinate to the central issue of the relationship between Maria, and her husband, Pierre, so that the quest to save Rodrigo masks a more urgent quest for self. Thus Maria's frenzied attempt to spirit Rodrigo away to a place of safety can be interpreted both literally and metaphorically: it is at once a displacement activity which distracts her from her husband's infidelity and an expression of her desire to save her doomed relationship. In the latter sense, Rodrigo's suicide prefigures the death of her marriage, referred to in the following terms on the penultimate page of the novel: ' – C'est la fin de notre histoire, dit Maria. Pierre, c'est la fin. La fin d'une histoire' (p. 150). Thus, as in *Moderato cantabile*, Duras incorporates significant elements from crime fiction in *Dix heures et demie du soir en été* to reinforce the theme of the quest for self, but, by neglecting the *enquête* and sympathising with the perpetrators of violence, subverts the conventional detective story, using it for her own very different purposes.

*L'Amante anglaise* differs significantly from Duras's other crime-based novels in that it is structured round an *enquête*. Based on a *fait divers*, *L'Amante anglaise* reflects the author's fascination with apparently motiveless acts: 'Le désir d'élucider les crimes

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<sup>110</sup> 'Un langage qui récuse la quiétude du savoir', *Critique*, July 1958.

apparemment gratuits la poursuit'.<sup>111</sup> The novel is a reworking of a previous play, *Les Viaducs de la Seine-et-Oise*, dealing with the same news item. In the play, a husband and wife discuss their complicity in the murder of the deaf and dumb cousin who acted as their servant. They then go to the local café, where they reveal their crime and, in a *coup de théâtre*, are arrested by a policeman disguised as a customer. In the novel, which appeared eight years later, significant changes have been made. The crime now appears to have been committed by the wife alone and the scene in the café takes place at the beginning of the novel. Duras's narrative technique is innovative: the story is presented as a series of tape recordings conducted by an interrogator who is writing a book about the murder, a *mise en abyme* reminiscent of Butor's *L'Emploi du temps*. After replaying the recording made by the detective of the scene in the café, he proceeds to interview first the husband and then the wife to try to elucidate their role in the crime.

There are clear echoes of the whodunit in the enigmatic nature of the crime, in which body parts found in trains throughout France are traced to the viaduct, the only place from which they can all have been dropped. The set piece café scene where the murderer's identity is revealed is also reminiscent of the *dénouement* of a *roman à énigme*. These revelations, however, occur early in the novel, most of which is devoted to a fruitless search for motives. The book differs considerably, therefore, from a conventional whodunit. The motives for the crime are never established, nor is there complete certainty about what happened, though Claire's madness seems to be at the heart of the matter. She seems, in fact, to be an embodiment of the witch figure which recurs throughout Duras's *oeuvre*: neglected by her philandering husband, she retreats into a world of nature and silence which is beyond his comprehension.

In *L'Amante anglaise*, Duras presents the reader with purportedly primary material from which he/she must make her own deductions. This is clearly artificial, in that Duras has herself selected it, but nevertheless emphasises Duras's desire to empower the reader rather than presenting him/her with ready-made solutions, as in the conventional detective story. This intention is made clear at the outset of the novel when the café owner is being questioned by the interrogator:

- La différence entre ce que je sais et ce que je dirai, qu'en faites-vous?
- Elle représente la part du livre à faire par le lecteur. Elle existe toujours.  
(pp. 9-10, author's italics)

<sup>111</sup> See Adler, *Marguerite Duras*, p. 414.

In this novel, then, Duras reinvents the *enquête* in the context of the *récit indécidable*, setting up a criminal investigation but leaving its solution firmly in the hands of the reader.

Two of Darrieussecq's novels, *Naissance des fantômes* and *Le Mal de mer*, have structural affinities with the detective novel, combining elements of *quête* and *enquête*. In both of these novels, however, the detective story element is quite slight, merely providing a loose framework for a narrative which revolves round the search for self rather than the solution of a crime. A ludic dimension is involved, as the author subverts the conventions of detective fiction by failing to provide the narrative closure expected by the reader, venturing instead into the uncharted territory of the exploration of the female psyche.

*Naissance des fantômes* clearly demonstrates Darrieussecq's desire to transcend the conventional and to push back the boundaries of fiction. While the opening sentence of the novel: 'Mon mari a disparu' (p. 11) leads the reader to anticipate that the plot will revolve round the resolution of a mystery of the type found in crime fiction, these expectations are soon dispelled. After the wife's initial call to the police and re-examination of the events leading up to her husband's inexplicable disappearance, the *enquête* element rapidly fades, as it becomes apparent that this disappearance is metaphorical rather than real. The novel moves into a metaphysical dimension in which the husband reappears in ghostly form after his wife has reassessed his importance in her life. *Naissance des fantômes*, then, is not a detective story in the normal sense but a meditation on husband-wife relations, in which the husband's absence is a necessary catalyst, leading her to write about the event and to renegotiate his role in her life.

In *Le Mal de mer*, too, Darrieussecq uses elements from crime fiction unconventionally, confounding the reader's expectations. This novel has overtones of the anti-detective story in that the transgressor, a woman who leaves her husband, taking her child with her, evokes considerably more sympathy from the reader than the deserted husband or the private detective who tracks the fugitives down. There are elements of the *roman à suspense* in the swiftly-moving series of events culminating in the discovery of the errant wife and the return of the child to her father. The relationship between *quête* and *enquête* is most interesting, involving polarisation between female and male, the female protagonists being caught up in an identity quest while the males are engaged in tracking down the female fugitives by means of clues. The quest, presented from a shifting female viewpoint in which the protagonists' identities merge, is not resolved: the enigmatic mother deserts her child at the end of the novel for a new life in Australia but little is revealed as to her motives, while the daughter's initiation by her mother is followed by a return to her former situation. The *enquête*, however, proves successful: the runaways are

discovered and the child is reclaimed by her father. Thus Darrieussecq uses the tension between *quête* and *enquête* to depict two strongly contrasting worlds, a feminine world characterised by mystery, empathy and instinct, and a masculine world which is highly organised but devoid of emotion. The majority of the novel is presented from a female point of view, in which the figures of the mother, daughter and granddaughter, all referred to as *elle*, overlap, creating an atmosphere of sympathy between the female protagonists. The male characters, on the other hand, are not portrayed in a favourable light: the few references to the father underline his distant role in the family, while the detective appears uncaring: 'Là, il y a la gamine, pour compliquer les choses' (p. 39). Thus, in a novel whose main interest lies outside the domain of crime fiction and which, therefore, should not be read as a detective story, Darrieussecq nevertheless makes innovative use of the linked themes of *quête* and *enquête*.

The use made of elements from crime fiction by my three selected authors varies considerably in its extent while sharing a common feature: the subversion of a genre whose artificiality contrasts strongly with the complexity of modern existence. Modiano makes systematic use of the genre, developing a framework for his novels which is similar to that of the detective story and using the criminal milieu in which many of his novels are set as a metaphor for Occupied France. Duras makes less frequent but significant reference to crime fiction in her novels, using a criminal setting on several occasions to highlight transgressive aspects of female identity in the context of sexual desire. Darrieussecq's borrowing from the genre is more peripheral, always remaining subordinate to her main preoccupation with identity in the couple and the family. In each case, a ludic and parodic element can be discerned, as the contrast between the open-ended nature of the identity quest and the contrived narrative closure imposed by the conventional detective story is emphasised. My chosen authors, then, refuse to be constrained by the conventions of the genre, while incorporating into their fiction those elements of detective fiction, such as the quest, which relate to their overriding preoccupation with identity.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq share an innovative approach to genre which is driven by the search for self. Duras's exploration of female identity exceeds traditional genre boundaries as she constantly adapts her mode of expression to fit her changing perception of selfhood. Modiano and Darrieussecq use genre somewhat differently, each developing a new narrative framework in which to conduct the identity quest. These new narratives, as well as being generically adventurous, also break with conventional patterns of storytelling, a subject to which I shall now turn my attention.

## Chapter 3: Memory, Chronology and Narrative Structure

La dimension de la mémoire est au coeur de l'écriture de soi.  
*Thomas Clerc*<sup>1</sup>

Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq display the same innovative spirit towards narrative as they demonstrated in their approach to genre, developing new structures which better reflect the search for self than the traditional linear plot. Thus the majority of their novels can be seen to share two characteristics which mark them out as structurally adventurous: chronological disruption, in which linearity is contested by new narrative patterns, and a lack of narrative closure, as loose ends are not tied up and neat conclusions are avoided. In this chapter I shall argue that these common structural elements result directly from the centrality of the search for self in my selected writers' fiction. I shall demonstrate that quest, in which memory is strongly implicated, together with its polar opposite, flight, underlie the narrative of self-discovery, fundamentally affecting its structure. My examination of the link between these prominent themes and narrative structure in the fiction of my chosen writers will reveal common structural patterns which have emerged as a direct result of the authors' preoccupation with the identity quest. A comparative analysis of the connection between theme and structure in the novels of these three writers from successive generations has not previously been undertaken and will shed light on the development of the articulation of the identity quest in the French novel of the last half-century.

### The new narrative

As a prelude to discussing the ways in which my chosen writers' engagement with the past shapes their fictional identity quests, I wish to examine briefly the nature of the narrative in the *récit indécidable*. As outlined in the Introduction, the novels of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq fit quite neatly into this category, in which the subjective nature of the narrative affects the plot, so that, as Blanckeman puts it, 'l'intrigue se décale, se dédouble,

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<sup>1</sup> *Les Écrits personnels*, p. 51.



se défait'.<sup>2</sup> The emergence of this new narrative and its defining characteristics have been summarised most effectively by Ricoeur in his seminal work *Temps et récit*, in which he devotes a chapter to 'les métamorphoses de l'intrigue'. I shall therefore recapitulate his argument here, applying it to the novels of my selected authors. Some underlying structural similarities will become apparent, which I shall comment on briefly. I shall then enumerate the new narrative shapes favoured by my authors before proceeding to a more detailed analysis of each writer's innovative use of narrative structure in the context of the search for self, from which both striking similarities and considerable differences in their use of new narrative patterns will be revealed.

Considering modern deviations from the traditional practice of storytelling which might be thought to suggest the death of narrative, Ricoeur links the uncertainty and flux of the modern world with the abandonment of plot: 'aujourd'hui, c'est l'incohérence présumée de la réalité qui requiert l'abandon de tout paradigme'.<sup>3</sup> The majority of my chosen authors' novels exemplify this trend, as plot is reduced to a minimum and the linear narrative is increasingly displaced by more innovative structures. Ricoeur goes on to observe that narrative closure is inappropriate in the undecidable novel, which revolves round the exploration of issues which have no ready-made solution: 'Une terminaison non conclusive convient à une oeuvre qui soulève à dessein un problème que l'auteur tient pour insoluble'.<sup>4</sup> This assertion is clearly true of the search for self, which, if identity formation is perceived as continuous, can never reach a conclusion. As the present self is constantly reassessed in the light of the past, a circular or spiral element, with no defined endpoint, contests the more traditional linear progression to a fixed goal. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq all eschew narrative closure in their fictional identity quests, which are markedly circular in character. Next, Ricoeur turns to the subject of reader participation in the new narrative, emphasising that a tacit or overt contract is necessary, in which the reader's help is solicited in the re-ordering of a disordered plot: 'je défais l'oeuvre et vous la refaites'.<sup>5</sup> My selected writers do in fact engage the reader in just such an agreement: Duras, as noted in the previous chapter, leaves the reader to decide as to the generic status of *L'Amant*, while Darrieussecq invites rereading of her novels, in which her frequent switching between characters, innovative use of language and incorporation of fantasy introduce an element of indeterminacy: discussing *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, she states that 'il demande, ou plutôt aimerait être relu. Il

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<sup>2</sup> *Les Récits indécidables*, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup> *Temps et récit*, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

demande au lecteur une forte collaboration'.<sup>6</sup> Modiano, too, seeks active engagement with his reader: in a recent interview in *Magazine Littéraire*,<sup>7</sup> he cites communicating with the reader as his main reason for preferring autofiction to what he considers to be the more narcissistic form of autobiography. Qualifying autobiography as artificial, he states that 'l'injection de fiction permet de s'adresser aux autres, de communiquer avec le lecteur, de rendre les choses plus frappantes pour quelqu'un d'extérieur'. Ricoeur concludes the chapter by asserting that, although plot is substantially altered in the *récit indécidable*, the rejection of linear chronology does not imply narrative anarchy but rather suggests that traditional narrative principles have been replaced by a new logic:

Le rejet de la chronologie est une chose; le refus de tout principe substitutif de configuration en est une autre. Il n'est pas pensable que le récit puisse se passer de toute configuration. Le temps du roman peut rompre avec le temps réel: c'est la loi même de l'entrée en fiction. Il ne peut pas ne pas le configurer selon de nouvelles normes d'organisation qui soient encore perçues par le lecteur comme temporelles.<sup>8</sup>

This being the case, it is legitimate to assume, as he does, that although the traditional linear novel may be moribund, the novel, being an adaptable genre, will continue to metamorphose, adapting to changing circumstances.

The novels of my chosen authors epitomise this metamorphosis of the narrative in the light of the modern identity crisis. What are the new organising principles which underlie their fiction in which the linear plot is minimised, time is perceived subjectively rather than objectively and narrative closure is banished? Which new patterns are favoured by Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq as they search for structures more appropriate to the identity quest than the traditional linear narrative? These are the questions which I shall address in this chapter. I shall argue that the twin themes of quest and flight underpin their innovative use of chronology. The first half of the chapter, therefore, will be devoted to the theme of quest and the second to the theme of flight. As the quest for self clearly implies a return to the past, I shall begin by considering the role of memory in identity construction. Having outlined the different types of memory drawn on by my selected authors, I shall discuss the effects of retrospection in the context of the identity quest on the narrative structure of the novels of my chosen authors, examining the tension which arises between prolepsis and analepsis. Next, I shall turn my attention to the theme of flight which is

<sup>6</sup> See Alain Nicolas, 'Marie et les cerveaux'.

<sup>7</sup> Juliette Cerf, '« L'Écriture est presque comme une opération chirurgicale »', *Magazine Littéraire* no. 242, October 2003, p. 70.

<sup>8</sup> *Temps et récit*, p. 43.

present in the fiction of all three writers, as their narrators flee either from or into the self. I shall discuss each author's treatment of this theme with particular reference to the introduction of timelessness into the narrative as stasis interrupts linearity and time is increasingly perceived in terms of an *éternel retour*. In the context of the flight into timelessness I shall explore the extent to which my chosen authors represent time in spatial terms in their novels. Several new temporal shapes common to my selected writers will emerge from my examination of their narratives in terms of quest and flight: the circle, the spiral, the parallel, the web and the hiatus. In order to clarify subsequent references to these figures, I shall now discuss each of these briefly, indicating the main uses made of them by Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq.

Foremost among these new patterns is the circle, which appears frequently, in the contexts of both quest and flight. Clearly, key memories become a focal point round which the narrative circles, at times obsessively: Duras's *Lol* is fixated on the ball at S. Tahla, Modiano's narrators constantly return to the episode of the father's arrest and Darrieussecq's *Bref séjour chez les vivants* revolves round the child's drowning. A somewhat different concept of circularity underlies Duras's writing, reflecting an affinity on the author's part with a profoundly Oriental and pre-industrial mode of thinking. Here life is seen as cyclical rather than progressive, so that the *éternel retour* replaces the idea of constant forward movement. Interestingly, Modiano, as we shall see, also makes frequent reference to this theme. Darrieussecq, too, shares Duras's concept of a primitive space where time is not perceived in linear terms. The unidirectional nature of time is also called into question in *Truismes*, where the narrator's metamorphosis into a sow appears to have a reversible dimension. The figure of the spiral can also be applied to the narratives of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq. Borgomano, in a recent analysis of Duras's work,<sup>9</sup> emphasises the author's penchant for recycling material, so that key figures recur throughout her fiction. Thus the circle is left open and can be seen to resemble a spiral, as Florence de Chalonge, comparing the India cycle to a dance round an empty centre, has observed.<sup>10</sup> Modiano's and Darrieussecq's protagonists frequently come full circle, as the end of an episode involving the search for self leads back to the beginning, which may involve the reassessment of the same events through writing. As I shall argue, this movement can be envisaged as a spiral, as, in spite of some indication of perpetual repetition, especially in

<sup>9</sup> See Madeleine Borgomano, 'Les lectures « sémiotiques » du texte Durassien: Un barrage contre la fascination', in Bernard Alazet (ed.), *Écrire, réécrire, bilan critique de l'œuvre de Marguerite Duras* (Paris-Caen: Lettres Modernes Minard, 2002), p. 112.

<sup>10</sup> In a doctoral thesis entitled 'L'Espace du récit: le cycle indien de Marguerite Duras', Université de Paris VIII, 1996, quoted by Borgomano, op. cit., p. 112.

Modiano's work, there is a suggestion in both authors' fiction of upward progress through self-scrutiny.

The parallel and the web are also frequently used by my selected writers. Obviously these figures are commonplace in more traditional fiction, where events are frequently presented by more than one narrator and social and family webs are created. In the fiction of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq, however, they are used considerably more innovatively. Parallelism emphasises the narrator's marginal status, involving the escape to a differently ordered universe which exists alongside the bourgeois world, but in a new time frame, as in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* and *Naissance des fantômes*. For Modiano, the narrator moves constantly between at least three different chronological periods, which are perceived as superimposed layers, united spatially rather than temporally. Darrieussecq's creative use of fantasy introduces a strong sense of parallel states of being which are inhabited by different protagonists. Oscillation between these different universes is common to all three writers: Duras's protagonists move between bourgeois society and a radically different mode of existence characterised by immersion in an erotic experience, Modiano's narrators tunnel constantly between different time layers and Darrieussecq's central characters are poised between the quotidian and the fantastic. The figure of the web is present to a varying degree in the fiction of my chosen writers through intratextual cross-referencing. This is omnipresent in Modiano's novels, where key characters and episodes recur regularly, giving the *oeuvre* a strongly autofictional quality, discernible in Duras's work, which is dominated by archetypal characters and situations, and faint in Darrieussecq's fiction, where a few important events are recycled. Darrieussecq, however, differs from the other two writers in creating an additional network within some of her novels, notably *Le Mal de mer* and *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, through the device of moving between characters and cross-referencing their thoughts, so that a family web of shared memory is created. This mental web is absent from the writing of Duras and Modiano, in which the notion of a family network is missing.

Lastly, the hiatus contests linear progression in the fiction of all three authors, as the flight into timelessness leads to stasis. As I shall demonstrate, each author envisages flight both negatively, as an escape from painful memory, and positively, as an engagement with the self outside the bounds of normal society. The interaction between negative and positive flight differs markedly between the three authors: Duras inclines strongly to the positive, Modiano favours the negative, while Darrieussecq maintains a more balanced position in the middle. The quality and duration of the timeless periods which interrupt their narrative thus differ significantly, as does the relationship between timelessness and

circularity. I shall return to a considerably more detailed examination of my authors' use of stasis, together with its connection with the theme of the *éternel retour*, in the second half of this chapter.

Having identified and commented briefly on the main structural configurations introduced by Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq into their fiction as a consequence of their preoccupation with identity, I now wish to return to the key themes of quest and flight in their novels. As I examine in turn each author's articulation of these themes, I shall make frequent reference to the narrative shapes outlined above, comparing and contrasting the use made of them by my selected authors. This comparison should prove illuminating in highlighting developments in narrative structure resulting from the increasing prominence of the identity quest in the modern French novel.

## Memory and the identity quest

Clerc's observation that 'la dimension de la mémoire est au coeur de l'écriture de soi'<sup>11</sup> underlines the importance of memory in the search for self. In order to appreciate the extent to which the identity quest affects the chronology of the novels of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq, a brief examination of the role of memory in identity creation will first be necessary. Clearly, if identity construction is perceived as a continuous process, memory has a crucial part to play as the present self is constantly re-evaluated in the light of the past. Thus identity formation has a narrative dimension: as Kaufmann has observed, 'L'identité est l'histoire de soi que chacun se raconte'.<sup>12</sup> The majority of the fiction of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq can be envisaged in these terms, as the authors constantly return to the past in order to make sense of the present. The complex interplay between present and past selves which is at work in the process of identity construction has been succinctly described by Todorov:

Le soi présent est une scène sur laquelle interviennent comme personnages actifs un soi archaïque, à peine conscient, formé dans la petite enfance, et un soi réfléchi, image de l'image que les autres ont de nous – ou plutôt de celle que nous nous imaginons dans leur esprit.<sup>13</sup>

In this image, different types of memory can be seen at work: identity is shaped by childhood memories, which are often very powerful, together with later impressions

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<sup>11</sup> See chapter heading.

<sup>12</sup> *L'Invention de soi*, p. 151.

<sup>13</sup> *Les Abus de la mémoire*, p. 25.

received in the wider context of the family and the community. There is a tension between these different types of memory: very early childhood memories may remain unmediated or may on the other hand be incorporated into family myth, being reshaped and given symbolic status as part of the creation of family identity. In the latter case, conflict may arise if an individual's sense of self does not accord with that imposed by the family. Both of these types of memory are in evidence in my chosen authors' novels, as they draw on powerful childhood experiences while also evoking the tension which arises when family myth is at variance with the individual's self-perception. As regards collective memory, a sense of group or national identity may be developed with reference to memories of participation in events of significance to those concerned. Whereas, however, the memory of shared experience can be a powerful factor in creating solidarity between group members, it may prove divisive in cases involving the misrepresentation of past events, affecting both individual and group identity. Each author approaches in a different way the issue of the repression or distortion of the past in the context of the family or the wider community. Family memory predominates in the work of Duras and Darrieussecq: a dominant theme in *L'Amant* is the contestation by the adolescent of the image imposed on her by her mother, while the repression of memory in the family underlies Darrieussecq's fiction. Modiano's fiction, while echoing these concerns, gradually acquires a wider collective dimension, as the author, moving away from the purely personal, endeavours through his writing to expose the distortion of truth embodied by the Vichy syndrome. In the context of identity creation, Hirsch's theory of postmemory,<sup>14</sup> involving the idea of a memory going back before birth but invested with a deeply personal and imaginative dimension, is of considerable relevance to the fiction of my chosen authors. Modiano's work, characterised by his affinity with the Occupation, accords well with it, as his protagonists seek to reinvent themselves through the exploration of this troubled period. Fainter echoes of this type of memory can be detected in the novels of Duras and Darrieussecq, through their invocation of a primitive, prelogical space, with which the female characters seek to become reconnected. In *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, a particular instance of postmemory is provided through the character of Nore, who has a clear, intuitive apprehension of a previous existence. I shall now examine in a little more detail each author's use of memory in the light of the different types of memory referred to above, indicating the structural implications of this reliance on retrospection.

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<sup>14</sup> See Marianne Hirsch: *Family Frames, Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 17-40.

Duras's fiction has its roots in her childhood in French Indochina, which is invoked both directly and obliquely throughout her writing. References to early childhood memories recur throughout her novels: the traumatic encounter with the mad beggarwoman, for example, is repeatedly alluded to, so that this haunting figure comes to assume archetypal status. As mentioned above, the conflict between individual and family memory is strongly evoked in *L'Amant*, where the teenager's dynamic but unrecorded perception of herself clashes with the mother's attempt to impose a false identity on her rebellious daughter by means of the family photograph album. As regards collective identity, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* exposes myths concerning the benignity of French colonial rule in Indochina while subsequently, notably through the invention of the character of Aurélia Steiner, later recreated as Samuel Steiner in *Yann Andrea Steiner*, Duras sought to combat anti-Semitism by highlighting the plight of Jewish Holocaust survivors.

Duras's use of memory in her fiction, however, far exceeds the nostalgic return to a world which ceased to exist after the French withdrawal from Indochina. The originality of her writing stems from her use of one seminal experience from this period, the premature and excessive sexual encounter round which *L'Amant* is structured and which Ricquart describes as 'le noyau de sa vie',<sup>15</sup> as the centrepiece of a new type of narrative. Thus the linear structure of her early novels is progressively abandoned in favour of circularity, as her fictions increasingly revolve round the endless rememoration and re-enactment of a highly-charged moment: the murder of a woman by her lover in *Moderato cantabile*, the seduction of Michael Richardson by Anne-Marie Stretter at the ball in S. Tahla in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* and the apparently random shooting of lepers in Calcutta by the vice-consul in the novel of that name, to cite three prominent examples. Memory is perceived as dynamic, as this central event is progressively reworked, a reshaping which becomes the focus of the author's exploration of the nature of feminine identity. The ultimate ungraspability of the excessive experience, however, precludes narrative closure. Thus memory in Duras's novels is radically destabilising, subverting the linear narrative as retrospection and repetition interrupt the forward movement of the narrative. In her best-known work, *L'Amant*, plot in the traditional sense has disappeared.

Modiano's fiction is retrospective in character as he returns to childhood and beyond to elucidate his origins. Traumatized by parental neglect compounded by paternal collaboration during the Occupation, Modiano creates narrators who, like him, are

<sup>15</sup> Janine Ricquart: *Écriture féminine et violence: Une étude de Marguerite Duras* (Birmingham, Alabama: Summa Publications inc., 1991), p. 129.

suffering from an identity crisis which necessitates a radical reappraisal of the past. Although many childhood memories are re-examined in this context, few are nostalgic: only in *Remise de peine* does Modiano evoke a sustained period of happiness spent with his brother in a village outside Paris shortly before the latter's untimely death. The prelapsarian atmosphere of this work contrasts with that of the majority of his other novels, which revolve round the scrutinising of less happy memories in the attempt to ascribe retrospective meaning to them and thus to fill the identity vacuum experienced by the son as a result of his parents' uncaring and, to him, incomprehensible behaviour. Thus an early incident in which the father takes the son to be weighed is examined for hidden significance: does the father's reiteration of the phrase 'On va se peser'<sup>16</sup> reveal anything about his attitude to his son? Similarly, the father's account of his arrest and release during the Occupation becomes a key memory which recurs throughout Modiano's writing with slight variations, symbolising both the ambiguity of Albert Modiano's relationship with the authorities and the plasticity of memory.<sup>17</sup> As described in Chapter 1, the mother's attempt to impose an unwanted identity on her daughter is strongly contested in *La Petite Bijou*, while in *Vestiaire de l'enfance* the same theme is evoked in the incident where the mother forces the child to wear a particular suede jacket, displaying considerably more concern for the fate of the jacket than for that of her son.<sup>18</sup> Memory acquires a metaphorical dimension in the symbolic but patently false memory which figures prominently in *Les Boulevards de ceinture*, in which the father attempts to push his son under the wheels of an underground train, thus acting out the latent hostility which he feels towards his child.

As Parrochia has aptly observed, 'le devenir est un revenir'<sup>19</sup> for Modiano, who, in a vain but sustained attempt to understand his father's troubled past, immerses himself in the atmosphere of the Occupation, creating fictional memories of a period which he came to consider as his own.<sup>20</sup> Although the father's identity proves elusive, the confrontation with the past enables the son to begin to create a sense of self and thereby to banish the feelings of absence and loss which had haunted him throughout his childhood and adolescence. This conjuring of the demons of the past is given a wider resonance as Modiano gradually transmutes his personal identity quest into that of the postwar generation, who failed to face up to the truth concerning the extent of French collaboration

<sup>16</sup> See *Chien de printemps*, p. 97 and the allusion to the same event in *Vestiaire de l'enfance*, p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, *Les Boulevards de ceinture*, p. 123, *Livret de famille*, pp. 127-9, *Chien de printemps*, p. 66, *Fleurs de ruine*, p. 48 and *Dora Bruder*, p. 62.

<sup>18</sup> See *Vestiaire de l'enfance*, pp. 76-7.

<sup>19</sup> *Ontologie fantôme*, p. 34.

<sup>20</sup> See Dominique Montaudon, 'Patrick Modiano: Le plus agréable c'est la rêverie', *Quoi Lire Magazine*, 8, March 1989..



during World War 2, preferring to take refuge in forgetfulness. The tension between the temptation of the flight into amnesia and the necessity of confronting painful memories is thus central to Modiano's *oeuvre*, which has been instrumental in dispelling a destructive and divisive collective myth.

Memory, therefore, is central to Modiano's writing, whose structure it informs, introducing circularity. Several different time layers co-exist in his novels, where the narrator moves constantly between the period of the Occupation, childhood memories, the 1960s and the time of writing. Narrative closure is clearly inappropriate in that the identity quest cannot of its nature be fully resolved, but, in contrast with Duras's novels, the majority of Modiano's narratives end on a note of cautious optimism as the narrator, having come to terms with the past, feels able to move on. Significantly, in his recent autobiographical work, *Un pedigree*,<sup>21</sup> the author acknowledges this progression, contrasting his childhood and adolescence during which 'tout défilait en transparence et je ne pouvais pas encore vivre ma vie'<sup>22</sup> with the feeling of liberation he experienced once he had embarked on his literary identity quest and his first book had been accepted for publication: 'Ce soir-là, je m'étais senti léger pour la première fois de ma vie. La menace qui pesait sur moi pendant toutes ces années, me contraignant à être sans cesse sur le qui-vive, s'était dissipée dans l'air de Paris. J'avais pris le large avant que le ponton vermoulu ne s'écroule. Il était temps'.<sup>23</sup> For this reason, the upwardly-moving spiral seems to me a more appropriate figure to apply to his overall use of narrative than the circle, favoured by the majority of critics.<sup>24</sup>

The theme of memory gains in importance throughout Darrieussecq's work: it is not prominent in *Truismes* but plays a greater part in *Naissance des fantômes* in the context of the *non-dit*, the articulation of which is further developed in the author's subsequent novels. A few powerful early childhood memories are alluded to in more than one work, notably the description of the cliff fall,<sup>25</sup> which assumes symbolic importance, representing both the erosion of the boundaries between sea and land and the destruction of the family. Imposed family memory is represented both by the reference to set-piece wedding photographs in *Naissance des fantômes*, which give an erroneous impression of solidarity within the couple and therefore have to be imaginatively redynamised by the removal of

<sup>21</sup> Paris: Gallimard, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> *Un pedigree*, p. 45.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 122.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Parrochia, *Ontologie fantôme*, p. 54, Guyot-Bender, *Mémoire en derive*, p. 20, Vanderwolk, *Rewriting the Past*, p. 7, Gellings, *Poésie et mythe*, p. 58 and Morris, *Patrick Modiano* (2000), p. 87.

<sup>25</sup> See *Le Mal de mer*, p. 76, *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, p. 121 and *Le Pays*, p. 88.

one partner, and by the ironic description of the Johnson family as 'la Famille Tant-Mieux' in *Bref séjour chez les vivants*.<sup>26</sup> More positively, a network of shared memories binding together family members is skilfully created through the extensive use of flashbacks, stream-of-consciousness language and pronoun switching in *Le Mal de mer* and *Bref séjour chez les vivants*. This web of family reminiscences breaks the linear narrative, introducing both circularity and the impression of simultaneity, as the reader becomes aware of the parallel existences of the protagonists, who, although separated by the *non-dit* which inhibits communication, are nonetheless inextricably linked through shared past experience. Narrative closure is absent from Darrieussecq's *oeuvre*: the endings of *Truismes* and *Le Mal de mer* contain significant ambiguity, while that of *Bref séjour chez les vivants* is circular. In *Naissance des fantômes*, *White* and *Le Pays*, closure is replaced by new beginnings, with a hint of upward progression, symbolised by the introduction of a spiral motif.<sup>27</sup> As mentioned in the previous chapter, the theme of the repression of memory, linked to the *non-dit*, is extended to the collective sphere through references to political events, such as the Holocaust, the Algerian war and the Argentinian *desaparecidos*, with the clear message that secrets and injustice must be exposed in the public as well as the private domain.

Memory, then, plays a crucial role in the novels of my chosen authors, destabilising the narrative, as tension arises between retrospection and prospection. The temptation of the flight into timelessness also recurs in my chosen authors' work, in which time and space are closely connected. It is to these chronological aspects of the narratives of my selected authors that I now wish to turn, first examining the effects of the retrospective identity quest on the narrative structure of the novels of each author and then considering how contrasting articulations of the theme of flight also affect the construction of some of these works. In discussing these two related topics, I shall demonstrate how linearity is challenged by new narrative patterns.

## **The identity quest, retrospection and narrative structure**

The narrative structure of the novels of my selected authors has received a variable amount of attention. Whereas much has been written about the structure of individual novels by Duras, the development of the narrative throughout her fiction has not so far been the subject of much scrutiny, due, no doubt, to the extent of her output coupled with her

<sup>26</sup> See *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, p. 225.

<sup>27</sup> See *Naissance des fantômes*, p.155 and *Le Pays*, p. 29.

relatively recent death (in 1996). Modiano's writing, being considerably more uniform than that of Duras, lends itself more easily to overall critical analysis, but, as we shall see, opinions diverge significantly as to the relationship between memory and narration in his novels. Darrieussecq's narrative development has not yet been closely examined.

The dramatic formal development which characterises the Durassian novel can be directly linked to the author's increasing use of retrospection, as she comes to perceive the female identity quest in terms of the endless re-enactment of a highly-charged emotional event. This recourse to memory radically alters the structure of her novels, banishing linearity. Thus it is possible to discern four distinct phases in Duras's developing use of the narrative: firstly, a linear phase, secondly, a phase where circularity disrupts linearity, thirdly, a phase where linearity has disappeared and finally, a hybrid phase where elements from the preceding phases are combined, as a return to storytelling coexists with structural innovation. These narrative phases have not, to my knowledge, been previously identified. Interestingly, however, Borgomano, in a recent overview of Duras's work,<sup>28</sup> uses rather different criteria of a prosodic nature to define three stages in the author's writing. These comprise a first stage involving the introduction of 'éclats poétiques'<sup>29</sup> into her otherwise fairly conventional writing, a second stage in which 'la pulsion narrative' is subordinated to considerations of rhythm and musicality, so that 'l'écriture se laisse traverser par une musique externe qui contrarie le mouvement linéaire du récit en lui imposant sa forme, le plus souvent celle d'une ritournelle, d'un éternel retour ou d'un cercle'<sup>30</sup> and a final stage in which this music is interiorised so that the novels resemble poems. Thus, although Borgomano uses stylistic rather than structural criteria in her analysis of Duras's narratives, her conclusions are not dissimilar to mine: both approaches discern a gradual destabilisation of the linear narrative followed by the replacement of linearity by circularity and the demise of the story. Borgomano, however, does not postulate a fourth phase, but rather envisages the second and third phases as continuing in parallel, so that later works may belong to either: she places *Emily L.* in the third stage but assigns the later *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* to the second stage. I shall now examine in turn the four narrative phases which I have identified, commenting on Duras's developing use of structural patterns.

Duras's first five novels, in which feminine identity is explored within a conventional narrative framework, are linear in character and end in narrative closure:

<sup>28</sup> Madeleine Borgomano, 'Une écriture « de nature indécise »' in Bernard Alazet, Christiane Blot-Labarrère and Robert Harvey (eds.), *Marguerite Duras. La tentation du poétique* (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2002), pp. 15-29.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

Maude's marriage to Georges is imminent at the end of *Les Impudents*, for example, while *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* ends with the mother's death and *Les Petits Chevaux de Tarquinia* concludes with Sara's decision to put an end to her holiday romance. Some fault lines can be distinguished in these traditional narratives, however, foreshadowing future developments. In *La Vie tranquille*,<sup>31</sup> the narrator, seeing herself in a mirror, suddenly perceives herself objectively as well as subjectively, thus introducing a dual perspective into the narrative. Circularity is adumbrated by the round-the-world voyage in *Le Marin de Gibraltar*, while the subplot of *Les Petits Chevaux de Tarquinia*, which revolves round a tragic death, prefigures the excessive experience which will become central to Duras's next group of novels.

*Le Square* (1955), in which dialogue replaces action and narrative closure disappears, marks a transition to a new phase of Duras's narrative development, ushered in by the publication of *Moderato cantabile* in 1958. In this novel, which has affinities with the *nouveau roman*, linearity is called into question as a highly-charged *crime passionnel* intrudes into the narrative, introducing circularity as its re-examination becomes the focus of the novel. Through this radical departure from conventional storytelling, Duras establishes a new narrative pattern, whose refinement will culminate in her most highly acclaimed work, *L'Amant*. How is linearity subverted in *Moderato cantabile*? Unlike Modiano, Duras does not introduce several different time periods into this novel, nor make extensive use of flashbacks. In fact the narrative of *Moderato cantabile* cannot, strictly speaking, be described as retrospective: the action occupies a period of just over a week in which time Anne Desbaresdes takes her child to two piano lessons, visits a café several times and attends a dinner party at her home. Two worlds, however, collide as her former linear existence is challenged by the circularity of the constant re-enactment of the murder in the café. As Best has observed,<sup>32</sup> narrative instability is represented here by space rather than time: Anne Desbaresdes oscillates between two mutually exclusive environments, the comfortable bourgeois space of her home and the alien, masculine space of the sleazy dockside café, between which the piano teacher's flat represents a neutral midway territory. Continuity is destroyed for ever by the rupture introduced by the excessive experience, whose contemplation absorbs Anne Desbaresdes to the point where she abandons her past for an unknown and unexplained future: as she explains to Chauvin, 'A partir de cette semaine, d'autres que moi mèneront mon enfant à sa leçon de piano' (p. 115).

<sup>31</sup> *La Vie tranquille*, pp. 121-2.

<sup>32</sup> *Critical Subjectivities*, pp. 64-7.

Duras further experiments with this new narrative pattern in a series of novels comprising *Dix heures et demie du soir en été*, *L'Après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas*, *Le Ravisement de Lol V. Stein*, *Le Vice-consul* and *L'Amante anglaise* and then abandons it before finally returning to it for her *chef d'oeuvre*, *L'Amant*. As she progressively refines her use of this innovative narrative, the role of retrospection increases, subjecting linearity to increasing disruption. A brief examination of the relationship between memory and chronology in *Le Ravisement de Lol V. Stein* will reveal the extent of this development.

Unlike *Moderato cantabile*, *Le Ravisement de Lol V. Stein* is dominated by the twin themes of memory and forgetting. The central character, Lol, having blotted out the painful memory of her abandonment by her fiancé for another woman on the eve of their wedding, has retreated, like Sleeping Beauty, into a trancelike state, in which she is described as a 'dormeuse debout' (p. 35). When memory is reawakened, however, by a move back to the town where she was living at the time of the traumatic event followed by a glimpse of two lovers embracing, the spell is broken. Emerging from her virtual existence as a model housewife, Lol throws herself into the task of recreating her identity through scrutinising the past: 'elle recommence le passé, elle l'ordonne, sa véritable demeure. Elle la range' (p. 46). As the seminal event of the ball at S. Tahla cannot be adequately recalled, Lol is obliged to reshape this experience through reconstruction, setting up and repeatedly observing another highly-charged situation: that of Jacques Hold and Tatiana Karl making love. Thus, in her attempt to grasp the unknowable, she embarks on a course of action which can have no resolution: 'le commencement sans fin de Lol V.Stein'(p. 184). This perpetual recreation of identity is central to the Durassian search for self.

The increased importance of memory in this novel is reflected in its structure, which is significantly affected by retrospection. Unlike *Moderato cantabile*, the narrative is retrospective in character, as the initially unidentified narrator looks back on Lol's life: Borgomano has described the novel as 'l'histoire d'une enquête sur Lol'.<sup>33</sup> Thus retrospection vies with prospection as the narrator recounts Lol's past life in a narrative whose linearity is frequently disrupted by flashbacks to the crucial episode of the ball. Further disruption occurs just over a third of the way through the novel, where the identity of the narrator is revealed to be that of one of the main protagonists, Jacques Hold. From this point onwards, the emphasis changes from backward to forward movement as Jacques becomes actively involved in Lol's journey of self discovery, although the theme of memory remains prominent and flashbacks to the ball still occur. This narrative *coup*, as well as destabilising the narrative, subverts it, in that the narrator is progressively revealed

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<sup>33</sup> Marguerite Duras, p. 34.

as unreliable: he admits on several occasions that (like Modiano's narrators) in the absence of facts, he has recourse to invention.<sup>34</sup> Thus the objectivity of the narrative is called into question not only by the deficiencies of Lol's memory, implicit in the reference to 'la mortelle fadeur de la mémoire de Lol. V. Stein' (p. 182), but also by the narrator's admitted shortcomings, so that Hill's description of Duras's narrative technique as 'radically disorientating'<sup>35</sup> seems apt.

Time is portrayed subjectively in *Le Ravissement de Lol. V. Stein*, in terms of how it is experienced rather than its actual duration. Thus the ten-year period of Lol's exemplary but frozen existence before her reawakening occupies less than a quarter of the narrative, while the much shorter period leading to her return to the ballroom is accorded considerably more space. The former period is depicted as a hiatus in which Lol's flight into forgetfulness has led to stasis and loss of identity. As time is suspended, circularity intrudes as Lol becomes caught up in 'la sempiternelle répétition de la vie' (p. 145). There are striking similarities here with Modiano's treatment of the theme of flight, a topic which I shall explore more fully later in this chapter. In the remainder of the novel, the forward movement of time is restored and events are described in much more detail, as Lol endeavours to reclaim her threatened identity. Paradoxically, however, the suspension of time finally triumphs, as circularity prevails and she is absorbed into 'l'éternité du bal' (p. 49). This circularity is perpetuated in a third group of novels in which forward movement has been suspended and which can be seen as extensions of Lol's story, exploring the state bordering on madness into which she falls at the end of the novel. In this aftermath of the engagement with the excessive experience, settings are reduced to a minimum and narrative all but disappears. The most noteworthy novel in this group is *L'Amour*, which I shall now briefly examine.

*L'Amour* is set in an apocalyptic landscape devastated by an unspecified war. The three nameless protagonists, two men and a woman, meet on a beach close to the ravaged town of S. Thala.<sup>36</sup> The very slight narrative, recounted in the present tense, concerns the interaction between the woman and one of the men, referred to as 'le voyageur', while the other man acts as guardian. The traveller has returned to this spot to commit suicide, in contrast to the woman, who appears to be already spiritually dead: she refers to herself as 'la morte de S. Thala' (p. 78) and says that she cannot die (presumably being dead already) (p. 96). Towards the end of the novel, the woman and the traveller revisit the ballroom in S.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, *Le Ravissement de Lol. V. Stein*, pp. 56, 57, 154, 155, 158.

<sup>35</sup> *Marguerite Duras*, p. 69.

<sup>36</sup> The change in spelling of the town's name is the author's.

Thala, making it possible to identify them as Lol and Michael Richardson. As they do so, S. Thala erupts in flames. In this sparse tale, narrative has effectively ceased. The setting has become metaphorical and the characters' identity is residual. They wander in a limbo which is described as an 'internement volontaire' (p. 51), surrounded by the primitive space of the sea. This novel, which is a precursor of the film *La femme du Gange*, seems to be best understood as a coda to *Le Ravisement de Lol. V. Stein*, in which Duras takes the result of Lol's obsession to its logical but pessimistic conclusion. If considered in isolation from the rest of the author's writing, the hermetic, ghost-inhabited world of *L'Amour* is difficult to penetrate.

*Détruire, dit-elle* can also be seen to belong to this third group of novels, as can the novellas *L'Homme du couloir* and *La Maladie de la mort* and the late work *Les Yeux bleus cheveux noirs*. Duras, however, turned to the cinema for her primary exploration of a situation which, being strongly visual and lacking in prospection, could not be easily encompassed within the framework of the novel. When she returned to novel writing, she reverted, significantly, to the narrative structure of her second group of novels, which received its most polished exposition in *L'Amant*. Her subsequent novels, with the exception of *Les Yeux bleus cheveux noirs*, constitute a fourth group, characterised by a return to the narrative coupled with an increased engagement with the collective and social world: *La Pluie d'été*, for example, examines relationships in a poor immigrant family living in the suburbs of Paris, while *Yann Andrea Steiner* reflects Duras's concern for the plight of Holocaust survivors, already expressed in the strongly autobiographical text *La Douleur*. Whereas Duras incorporates elements from her second and third groups of novels into these late works, such as a lack of narrative closure and the use of the narrative present, they are structurally less innovative: in her final reworking of her childhood and adolescent experiences, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, she has returned to the linearity of *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*. In this third-person narrative, presented as a series of film shots, the author seems to be distancing herself in her old age from the immediacy and complexity of the experiences depicted so compellingly in *L'Amant*.

Modiano's fiction contrasts markedly with that of Duras in that retrospection is present from the outset. As we have seen, Modiano's *oeuvre* revolves round a search for self which necessitates a return to the past as part of the quest for new origins in which identity can flourish. Clearly, this retrospective dimension affects the structure of the novels, introducing a tension between backward-looking memory and forward-moving time. After his first two exploratory novels, *La Place de l'Étoile* and *La Ronde de nuit*, Modiano developed a narrative pattern structured round memory to which all his

subsequent novels conform. This consists of a narrative framed by retrospection in which at least three different time periods coexist. Because of the omnipresence of retrospection in Modiano's writing and the significance of its effect on his use of narrative structure, the issues of memory and narration in his fiction have been examined by a number of critics. I therefore wish to consider briefly two recent critical works on these topics before discussing further the issues of retrospection and chronology in the writer's novels. As can be deduced from their titles, VanderWolk's *Rewriting the Past: Memory, History and Narration in the Novels of Patrick Modiano*<sup>37</sup> is chiefly concerned with memory, while Kawakami's *A Self-conscious Art: Patrick Modiano's Postmodern Fictions*<sup>38</sup> concentrates mainly on the narrative. The former, which is chiefly concerned with memory, seems to me to be fundamentally flawed in that the author fails to make a clear connection between the identity quest, memory and the non-linear narrative in Modiano's writing. The latter does make this link, providing useful theoretical background to Modiano's use of disrupted chronology without, however, elaborating on the way in which the recourse to memory destabilises narrative order. Having outlined these two critics' positions as regards memory and the narrative, I shall supplement their account of the relationship between the identity quest, retrospection and narrative structure in Modiano's work.

VanderWolk, while identifying 'the magic of memory' as providing the thread which links Modiano's novels,<sup>39</sup> throws little light on how this affects the narrative process. He scarcely mentions the topic of identity, with the result that his account of Modiano's reasons for writing about memory is inevitably limited: 'In his latest novel, *Du plus loin de l'oubli* (1996), Patrick Modiano comes closer than ever to specifying why he writes about memory. He feels imprisoned and wants to escape.' This involves recording the past so that it can be forgotten: 'The catalyst for the forgetting process is writing, as if putting memories on paper will eliminate their power to hurt, to imprison the author.'<sup>40</sup> It appears to me that the role of retrospection in Modiano's writing is considerably more complex than is suggested here, involving more than merely the desire for liberation from the past through forgetting: the return to the past through memory is an essential part of the recreation of identity through the reworking of past experience. Modiano's narrator, who does indeed lack a sense of identity because of his traumatic past, is obliged, often reluctantly, to confront this past and reassess it in order to acquire a stronger sense of self and thus to banish the feelings of emptiness and loss which constantly assail him.

<sup>37</sup> Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997.

<sup>38</sup> Already referred to in the previous chapter.

<sup>39</sup> *Rewriting the Past*, p. 3.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.



VanderWolk's unsatisfactory account of Modiano's use of memory fails to take the dynamic nature of the narrator's identity quest into account and also does not differentiate between the two contrasting aspects of forgetting, which underlie Modiano's writing: repression of memory, which is harmful, and the laying to rest of reworked memories, which is beneficial.

It seems to me, therefore, that, although VanderWolk refers to a considerable body of theoretical material on memory from a wide variety of sources in his subsequent examination of individual novels by Modiano, he does not engage satisfactorily with Modiano's complex use of retrospection. As far as narration is concerned, surprisingly little space, in view of the study's title, is devoted to the chronology of Modiano's novels. The two paragraphs on this subject in the introduction contain little of note: an acknowledgement of the novels' lack of linearity, identification of the two chronological poles round which the works revolve as 'the writer's present and the father's past' and a further division of time by Modiano into narrative units: 'father's time, narrator's youth, writer's present'.<sup>41</sup> When the subject of chronology is returned to in the latter part of the book, VanderWolk, having commented on the novels' lack of narrative closure, asserts that: 'The traditional novel, with its chronological, structural and thematic coherence, has given way to meditations on being and time in which only thematic coherence remains.'<sup>42</sup> To my mind, this betrays a failure on VanderWolk's part to apprehend the structural sophistication of Modiano's narratives. His novels are not mere ontological musings but are carefully crafted according to the altered logical principles recognised by Ricoeur. This has been acknowledged by critics such as Nettelbeck and Hueston, who demonstrate how apparently disjointed narratives, such as *Livret de famille*, are in fact very tightly constructed.<sup>43</sup>

Kawakami remedies VanderWolk's defective account of Modiano's narration to a significant extent both by demonstrating greater insight into the processes which underlie his use of memory and by providing a theoretical framework which accounts for the author's use of disrupted chronology. Having noted in the first chapter of her study the relationship between narrative voice, identity and memory, which she describes as 'thematically and structurally fundamental to Modiano's novels',<sup>44</sup> she devotes the next chapter to the topic of the order of narration. Noting the contrast between the many time references in Modiano's novels and the impression that the reader gains of chronological

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>43</sup> *Pièces d'identité*.

<sup>44</sup> *A Self-conscious Art*, p. 23.

redundancy, she observes that: 'It is as if the different chronological levels are situated on a single plane, on which they enjoy an unhierarchical and interdependent existence.'<sup>45</sup> She then turns to both the Russian Formalists and to Genette in her attempt to find a theoretical model for Modiano's disordered narratives, equating the former's definitions of *suzhet* and *fabula* with the latter's *récit* and *histoire*: the first term in each case refers to the written text while the second refers to the story behind it. In order to describe adequately Modiano's disjointed chronology, she has recourse to Genette's third category, *narration*, which refers to the subjective order in which events are perceived by the narrator's consciousness at the moment of telling. According to Kawakami, it is this third category which 'best accounts for the peculiarities of Modiano's presentation of time in his narratives.'<sup>46</sup> When she proceeds to consider Modiano's narratives in the light of this third definition, she comes to the conclusion that: 'Geographical coherence takes the place of chronological order in the consciousness of the narrator',<sup>47</sup> an illuminating insight to which I shall return later in this chapter. Kawakami emphasises the demands which Modiano's disordered narratives place on the reader, who is involved in 'the ceaseless activity of sense making'<sup>48</sup> and who must avoid the temptation to reorder narratives which have 'no final closure, no triumphant detective, but an anti-climactic fade-out or a displacement effect.'<sup>49</sup>

Kawakami's remarks on Modiano's use of narrative, as outlined above, seem to me to be considerably more coherent than VanderWolk's limited treatment of the subject. She ends the chapter on narrative order by situating Modiano's experimentation in the context of the *nouveaux romanciers*, in whose footsteps she sees him as following, describing his narratives in the following terms:

In fact Modiano's narratives appear to be based on an understanding of time which is neither linear nor teleological. The model of time which emerges from these narratives is not the familiar one of the path, in which events occur one after another by progression towards a meaningful conclusion, but that of a *web*. By a web I mean a structure in which the various elements are interdependent regardless of chronological hierarchy, and where causality is bi-directional; that is, the present is as capable of influencing and changing the past as the other way round.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28-9.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

Kawakami's definition of Modiano's model of time in terms of a web is apt, in that it reflects his non-linear but cross-referenced universe. Her description of causality fittingly describes the process of *nachträglichkeit*, in which memories are constantly reshaped and updated in the light of the subject's developing identity. She thus shows herself to be considerably more aware than VanderWolk of the new narrative principles underlying Modiano's fiction. While emphasising the underlying coherence of the author's *oeuvre*, however, she does not, to my mind, examine in sufficient detail the complex relationship between retrospection and narrative structure in his novels, a topic which I shall now address.

Modiano's fictional world is characterised not only by connection but also by disjunction, as a prominent critic, Morris, has recognised in his recent analysis of Modiano's work in terms of polar opposites.<sup>51</sup> While subscribing to Kawakami's definition of Modiano's overall concept of temporality in terms of a web, I wish at the same time to draw on Morris's use of opposites in my examination of the author's disrupted use of chronology. Four pairs of opposites can be seen to underlie Modiano's disjointed narratives: retrospection/prospection, movement/stasis, linearity/circularity and continuity/rupture. I shall now consider his use of narrative structure in the light of these opposing tendencies.

As stated earlier, each of Modiano's novels has a strongly retrospective dimension, as the narrator goes back in time to an earlier period in his life, usually that of late adolescence, and describes events leading up to a turning point, at which the novel generally ends. Modiano's narrator, therefore, is a time traveller (as Guyot-Bender aptly describes him),<sup>52</sup> whose role involves a backward journey: the phrase 'remonter le cours du temps' recurs regularly throughout Modiano's fiction.<sup>53</sup> The period to which he returns is normally that of the 1960s, in which the forward-moving narrative leading up to the crucial moment of rupture (variously described as 'rupture',<sup>54</sup> 'cassure',<sup>55</sup> and 'fracture'<sup>56</sup>) is set. Because of the link between the narrator's identity quest and the father's dubious past, this 'vie antérieure'<sup>57</sup> has overtones of the Occupation, in which the 1940s are represented both by the creation of a shady milieu analogous to the one in which Modiano *père* operated and by a variable number of references to the period of World War 2. Thus each novel has

<sup>51</sup> Patrick Modiano (2000), p. 11.

<sup>52</sup> *Mémoire en dérive*, p. 9.

<sup>53</sup> See *Livret de famille*, p. 92, *Voyage de nocces*, p. 157, *Un cirque passé*, p. 64, *La Petite Bijou*, p. 147 and *Accident nocturne*, p. 29.

<sup>54</sup> *Dora Bruder*, p. 77.

<sup>55</sup> *Chien de printemps*, p. 26..

<sup>56</sup> *Accident nocturne*, p. 91

<sup>57</sup> *Quartier perdu*, p. 13.

multiple time references: the narrative is framed near the outset by references to the time of writing, so that retrospection is clearly signalled,<sup>58</sup> and changes of time period are subsequently indicated. The forward thrust of the narrative is further interrupted by frequent backward references to remembered episodes in the narrator's childhood. Linearity, therefore, is severely disrupted as retrospection challenges prospection and several temporal layers co-exist.

The theme of the passage of time is prominent in Modiano's writing as he seeks to retrieve clues from the past before they are irretrievably lost. The task is urgent, as time erodes memory: 'le temps poursuivra son lent travail d'usure'.<sup>59</sup> Only memory can reverse this process and bring back those who have disappeared for ever, such as Dora Bruder and Modiano's lost brother, whose short lives are poignantly evoked by the author. This recourse to memory, however, brings its own problems. Firstly, memory is unreliable, so that entire periods of the past are beyond recall and can only be recreated through the use of the imagination: 'L'oubli finit par ronger des pans entiers de notre vie'.<sup>60</sup> Secondly, memory takes no account of change: the destruction of buildings has frequently obliterated the past, so that revisiting these places only induces 'une terrible impression de vide'.<sup>61</sup> The wealth of documentary evidence which litters Modiano's *oeuvre* serves to exacerbate this feeling of emptiness, as former addresses no longer exist and telephones remain unanswered: 'le numéro sonnerait dans le vide pour l'éternité'.<sup>62</sup> Thirdly, memory is involuntary as well as voluntary, so that, in the search for the past, unbidden memories inevitably rise to the surface. Modiano's narrator experiences this process as 'un phénomène de surimpression',<sup>63</sup> in which the intervening period of time is negated by the superimposition of two similar impressions, causing time to stop: when the narrator of *Accident nocturne* hears the name of a former friend announced over the loudspeaker at an airport thirty years after their last meeting, 'ces années-là ne comptaient plus'.<sup>64</sup> Unhappy memories of childhood frequently assail Modiano's narrator, as when, in *Un cirque passe*, a smell brings back the anguish of the return to boarding school.<sup>65</sup> These memories pull the narrator back into a past which he would prefer to forget and which he feels to be 'une autre vie',<sup>66</sup> giving rise to an urge to block memory and suspend the passage of time.

<sup>58</sup> As, for example in the reference to 'il y a trente ans' on the opening page of *Du plus loin de l'oubli*.

<sup>59</sup> *Vestiaire de l'enfance*, p. 49.

<sup>60</sup> *Accident nocturne*, p. 78.

<sup>61</sup> *Quartier perdu*, p. 45.

<sup>62</sup> *Un cirque passe*, p. 92.

<sup>63</sup> *Chien de printemps*, p. 17.

<sup>64</sup> *Accident nocturne*, p. 57.

<sup>65</sup> *Un cirque passe*, p. 101.

<sup>66</sup> See *Quartier perdu*, p. 50 and *Un pedigree*, p. 120.

Stasis, then, frequently interrupts forward movement, as, in the world to which the narrator retreats, life is perceived as an 'éternel retour'<sup>67</sup> in which time is cyclical rather than linear and the narrator returns at intervals to the same place: 'de temps en temps on revient à la case départ'.<sup>68</sup> The continuity implicit in this circularity is, however, periodically interrupted, when Modiano's narrator, perceiving himself to be on the threshold of a new stage of his existence, experiences a strong desire to break with the past. This is well demonstrated by the narrator of *Accident nocturne*, who retrospectively describes the accident round which the novel revolves in the following terms: 'Cet accident de la nuit dernière n'était pas le fait du hasard. Il marquait une cassure. C'était un choc bénéfique, et il s'était produit à temps pour me permettre de prendre un nouveau départ dans la vie.'<sup>69</sup> While such defining moments do not immediately lead to a radical improvement in the narrator's condition and may indeed prove illusory, as is implied in *Au plus loin de l'oubli*, in which two such defining moments occur at fifteen-year intervals, it does seem that they can be seen as part of the ongoing identity quest, in which, in spite of setbacks, the narrator is engaged in an upward spiral. The writer's own successful career can be seen as proof of this, in which he has overcome an unhappy childhood and extended his search for self outward to embrace a generation whose connection with the past was impeded by the Vichy syndrome. The fact that he has at last felt able to turn to autobiography rather than fiction, in the recently published work entitled *Un pedigree*, seems to affirm the beneficial nature of the literary identity quest which is at the heart of his fiction.

While Darrieussecq's narratives are not as uniformly centred round memory as those of Modiano, retrospection plays a significant part in her fiction. As Jordan has pointed out,<sup>70</sup> the narrative of the author's first novel, *Truismes*, is retrospective: the narrator makes it clear at the outset that she is impelled by an urgent desire to recount the story of her metamorphosis into a sow before it is too late. Within this framed narrative, however, memory does not have a major role, as the naïve narrator, artlessly telling her tale, has little recourse to reminiscence. In Darrieussecq's later writing the picture is rather different: time and memory become increasingly significant, affecting the narratives, which are considerably more structurally innovative than *Truismes*. Her second novel, *Naissance des fantômes*, while resembling its predecessor insofar as the story is framed in a similar way, is chronologically much more complex. Three different temporal elements combining

<sup>67</sup> *Accident nocturne*, p. 60.

<sup>68</sup> *Quartier perdu*, p. 21.

<sup>69</sup> *Accident nocturne*, p. 18.

<sup>70</sup> *Contemporary French Women's Writing*, p. 60.

retrospection and propection are skilfully interwoven in this novel, in which, as we have seen, Darrieussecq makes ludic use of elements of the detective story in the context of the search for self. In the next three novels, a web of memory is created, linking the multiple narrators, as the theme of the *non-dit* becomes increasingly prominent. In *Le Pays*, the author experiments still further, making extensive use of parallelism, circularity and the hiatus in her exploration of the tension between the writing and the written selves. I shall now examine Darrieussecq's developing use of the narrative in these novels in a little more detail.

The construction of *Naissance des fantômes* combines a *histoire* which begins with the disappearance of the narrator's husband and ends with his reappearance in ghostly form and a *récit* which involves frequent references to the past, as the narrator scrutinises the seven years of their marriage in order to elucidate this inexplicable event. Thus propection and retrospection compete with each other throughout the novel. As well as this alternation between forward and backward movement, an additional degree of retrospection is provided by the framing of the text at the outset of the narrative, when the evening of the husband's disappearance is referred to on the first page as 'ce soir-là', making it clear that the narrator is referring back to the incident from a later time period. Thus three temporal movements coexist in the text, two of which are retrospective: the forward-moving narrative of the events between the husband's disappearance and reappearance, the backward-moving reference to events leading up to the start of this narrative and the retrospection of the narrator as, having become a writer, she commits the story to paper. Parallelism is also present in the author's use of dual worlds, between which the narrator oscillates as she gradually rediscovers herself. A progression from real time and space into a virtual world beyond the quotidian occurs, to which I shall return when I examine the subject of the flight into timelessness later in this chapter.

Darrieussecq's next three novels are not framed in the same way as *Naissance des fantômes* and thus lack this extra layer of retrospection. All of them, however, have a shifting narrative point of view, so that a web of memory is created as different narrators refer back to the same event. This is especially evident in *Le Mal de mer* and *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, which are written in stream-of-consciousness language with constant slippage from one narrator to another. Thus, whereas both have a narrative which occupies a well-defined time period (of approximately one month in the former novel and twenty-four hours in the latter), propection is frequently interrupted by the different protagonists' recourse to memory. Many of these recollections are cross referenced, allowing the reader to experience the same event from different points of view and introducing simultaneity

into the narrative, as the central characters are portrayed as leading separate but parallel lives. This simultaneity is most strikingly evoked in *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, whose complex narrative structure in which two different time zones co-exist as the narrative moves between France and Argentina is worthy of close scrutiny.

Unlike Darrieussecq's other novels, *Bref séjour chez les vivants* has a very tight, almost classical structure: the novel spans a period of approximately 24 hours in the life of the Johnson family, thus observing the unity of time. The reason for the choice of such a restricted period is gradually revealed to the reader: the day depicted is no ordinary day but the anniversary, some 25 years after the event, of the discovery of the body of Pierre Johnson, accidentally drowned at the age of three. An attentive reader will be able to identify this date as October 26<sup>th</sup>, 1974. The opening scene of the novel takes place on the morning of the anniversary of this fateful day and the story closes at about the same time on the following day. The book is punctuated by time references, as each character goes about her daily activities: at quarter past nine, Anne is still waiting for the boyfriend who had arranged to meet her at 9, at 10.30, Nore has an appointment at the opticians, at midday the mother hears the clock strike twelve as she does her household chores and so on. Times are adjusted to Argentinian time in the case of Jeanne, who is still in bed, in the grip of a nightmare, at the outset of the novel and whose death can be presumed to occur shortly after 19:07, when she looks at her watch for the last time as her car sinks to the bottom of the canal towards the novel's close. In opposition to the tight linear structure provided by these frequent references to the passage of time on the fateful day, a circular movement is introduced, as each character reflects on the present moment, frequently returning to the past as memories, often unbidden, rise to the surface. A web of collective family memory is skilfully woven by Darrieussecq by means of references by different characters to shared memories: the mother's reference to Toto is picked up by Jeanne,<sup>71</sup> while her invocation of the story of the hermit crab is echoed by Anne<sup>72</sup> and all three Johnson daughters remember sniffing ether during their childhood in an attempt to blot out painful memories,<sup>73</sup> to cite three examples of the many cross references which occur in the text. The prominent mention of roses, symbolising death, on the first and last pages of the novel also emphasises its circularity as tragedy perpetuates itself and the story comes full circle. By juxtaposing linearity and circularity in this way, Darrieussecq represents the tension

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<sup>71</sup> *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, pp. 58, 99.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 58, 67.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 119, 186, 300.

between the inexorable forward march of time and the interrogation of the past through memory.

Darrieussecq uses an original narrative technique in *Bref séjour chez les vivants* to emphasise the lack of communication between the family members, all of whom except Nore are enclosed in a private bubble of unacknowledged grief. The text is subdivided into sections featuring a different person in turn, none of whom communicates directly with the others. Thus the *non-dit* at the heart of this dysfunctional family is incorporated into the structure of the novel. The fragmentation of the narrative voice is further reinforced by the author's failure to indicate clearly at the beginning of each section who the narrator is, together with her alternation between first- and third-person narrative, which provides a constant movement between subjectivity and objectivity. In order to convey as accurately as possible the disjointed nature of human thought and memory, Darrieussecq uses elliptical, stream-of-consciousness language, including passages in English and Spanish as well as snippets of fairy stories, horoscopes, popular songs and a wide variety of other material. Her adoption of this highly innovative narrative style, while adding authenticity to the text, makes the novel quite difficult to read: the story of the child's drowning is only gradually revealed through the reminiscences of the characters concerned, so that the reader has to concentrate in order to piece together what happened, which does not become clear until halfway through the novel. Interestingly, Darrieussecq or her publishers clearly considered this degree of effort to be too great for English readers, as in the English translation, the narrator's name is given at the start of each new section. The very gradual revelation of the circumstances surrounding the central tragedy does, however, have the advantage of maintaining the suspense, while the novel's complexity makes its rereading (recommended, as we have seen, by the author) both desirable and rewarding.

In her most recent novel, *Le Pays*, Darrieussecq takes structural adventurousness further than before, combining elements from her previous works. As in *Naissance des fantômes*, the writer uses a framed narrative to examine a life-changing event in the narrator's existence which leads to a new beginning: in this novel, the narrator, having moved back to her native land, gives birth to a baby there. Memory plays an important role in this work, in which retrospection and prospection alternate as the narrative moves between the time before the move, the move itself and its sequel. An added degree of complexity is, however, introduced by the introduction of a parallel text, written in the third person and printed using a different typeface, which periodically interrupts the primary narrative. This second story, representing the author/narrator's written account of her return to her roots, contains not only a measure of retrospection but frequent hiatuses as the



discussion of general topics disrupts the onward flow of the narrative. Thus parallelism is strongly present in *Le Pays* although the web of memory of the preceding three novels is absent owing to the use of a single narrator. Both of the intersecting narratives are circular in character, revolving first round the move and later round the death of the narrator's infant brother which, as in *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, is gradually revealed to be at the heart of the search for self. In this work, then, Darrieussecq makes sophisticated use of new narrative shapes to throw light on the nature of the literary identity quest.

Retrospection, then, is present to a variable but significant extent in Darrieussecq's novels, disrupting linearity. As we have seen, her novels lack narrative closure as the identity quest leads towards an uncertain future rather than to the neat resolution of past problems: the outcome of the narrator's porcine transformation in *Truismes* is left open to question as are the reasons behind the mother's flight to Australia in *Le Mal de mer*. Darrieussecq's bleak use of circularity in *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, where tragedy perpetuates itself, contrasts with the more optimistic conclusion of *Naissance des fantômes*, where the motif of the spiral, invoked shortly before the narrator reapprehends her husband in ghostly form, seems to indicate an upward progression as the narrator embarks on a new life as a writer. This cautious note of optimism is echoed by the ending of *White*, where Edmée's pregnancy points to the future, and *Le Pays*, where a female child replaces the male infant whose identity is irretrievably lost. The theme of rupture, though not as strong as in Modiano's novels, is implicit in these new beginnings: the narrator in *Naissance des fantômes* will never again be a subservient wife nor will the mother in *Le Mal de mer*, having initiated her daughter, return to her maternal role. In *Le Pays*, the female replaces the male, banishing the *non-dit*.

From the above discussion of the relationship between the identity quest, retrospection and narrative structure in the novels of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq, it can be concluded that the memory-driven search for self does indeed have a significant impact on the chronology of their fiction. The retrospection which is an integral part of the identity quest is incompatible with the linear narrative, leading instead to circularity and spirality. In the open-ended constructions examined above, narrative patterns such as the web, the parallel and the hiatus reflect the complexities of the shifting postmodern experience of selfhood. I now wish to turn to the related topic of the flight into timelessness, which is prominent in the fiction of my selected authors and which significantly affects the structure of the narrative.

## The flight into timelessness

While a number of critics have noted the importance of the theme of flight in my chosen authors' fiction,<sup>74</sup> the link with narrative structure has received little attention. I shall now remedy this omission, discussing how the three writers' incorporation of the theme of flight into the search for self disrupts linearity in their novels. Flight in their writing will be shown to have both a positive and a negative dimension and to be temporally as well as spatially significant, radically altering the protagonists' sense of time. I argue that each author envisages flight both positively and negatively and that, for all three, flight is linked to timelessness and the theme of the *éternel retour*.

As noted in Chapter 1, Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq all adopt a marginal position on the fringes of society from which to conduct their search for self. This *entre deux* can be considered to be a positive space, removed from the frenetic distractions of a world characterised by rapid and constant change. In the case of Duras and Darrieussecq, it is linked with a more primitive, pre-logical and pre-patriarchal state, embodied by images of the sea and the forest, while Modiano's isolation is portrayed in an urban context. In contrast to this positive aspect of flight to the margins, however, a considerably more negative concept of flight is also present in the writing of all three authors. This concerns the flight from self which occurs as a consequence of retrospection, when the re-examination of the past necessary for identity formation becomes unbearable. In the ensuing escape from painful memory, time is suspended in favour of amnesia and stasis, which disrupt the identity quest. This unproductive state is represented by both Duras and Modiano in terms of the Sleeping Beauty myth and Modiano additionally creates a special spatial concept, 'la Suisse du coeur', to describe it. For Darrieussecq, it results from the *non-dit*, the suppression of family memory which leads to mental and physical flight. All three writers depict this flight into forgetfulness as a temptation which has adverse consequences for those who succumb to it.

I shall now examine each author's use of the theme of flight, contrasting the positive and negative dimensions mentioned above and considering the relationship between flight and narrative structure. Modiano's treatment of this theme remains remarkably consistent throughout his writing, so I shall explore the flight into timelessness in his novels before considering the somewhat more disparate use of this theme by Duras and Darrieussecq.

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<sup>74</sup> See, for example, Morris, *Patrick Modiano* (2000), pp. 36-62 and Tison-Braun, *Marguerite Duras*, p. 8.

Two distinct types of flight recur throughout Modiano's *oeuvre*, flight as rupture or rebellion and the flight from self. The former is depicted as empowering whereas the latter leads to stasis. Paradoxically, both engender an impression of timelessness, which is perceived as liberating in the first case and stultifying in the second. This surprising dichotomy in the representation of flight can be seen to have autobiographical roots: the first type of flight stems from Modiano's repeated and positive experience of absconding from boarding school while the second type is related to his negative reaction to his father's troubled past and ultimate abandonment of his family. The ambiguity inherent in the author's depiction of the effects of timelessness mirrors his ambivalence towards the passage of time: on the one hand, the flow of time causes him so much anguish that he endeavours to halt it but, on the other hand, he is acutely aware that no progress is possible when time is suspended.

The theme of flight as a liberating adventure recurs at intervals throughout Modiano's work. In *Voyage de nocces*, the narrator gives his family the slip, pretending to go away on business when he is in fact escaping to a completely different destination to search for himself, while, in *Du plus loin de l'oubli*, a trip to London is evoked in the following terms: 'j'ai éprouvé l'ivresse habituelle que je sentais monter en moi, chaque fois que je prenais la fuite'(p. 87). It is in *Dora Bruder*, however, where the topic of the *fugue* recurs regularly, that the theme of the liberating flight is most in evidence. Flight becomes a *leitmotif* in this work, in which Dora's disappearance from school, evoked at the outset by the newspaper advertisement describing the missing girl, is linked to the narrator's flights from school at a similar age. Through frequent reference to these successive acts of rebellion on the part of both teenagers, Modiano builds a bridge of empathy between the narrator and the central character, both of whom feel persecuted, though, as the former is at pains to point out, Dora's plight is very much more serious than his own.<sup>75</sup> At the central point of the book, Modiano provides a very clear exposition both of the reasons behind this type of flight and the short-lived sense of euphoria resulting from it:

Je me souviens de l'impression forte que j'ai éprouvée lors de ma fugue de janvier 1960 – si forte que je crois en avoir connu rarement de semblables. C'était l'ivresse de trancher, d'un seul coup, tous les liens: rupture brutale et volontaire avec la discipline qu'on vous impose, le pensionnat, vos maîtres, vos camarades de classe. Désormais, vous n'aurez plus rien à faire avec ces gens-là; rupture avec vos parents qui n'ont pas su vous aimer et dont vous vous dites qu'il n'y a aucun recours à espérer d'eux; sentiment de révolte et de solitude porté à son incandescence et qui vous coupe le souffle et vous met en état d'apesanteur. Sans doute l'une des rares occasions de ma vie où j'ai été vraiment moi-même et où j'ai marché à mon pas (pp. 77-8).

<sup>75</sup> See *Dora Bruder*, p. 57.

Timelessness is presented here in a positive light, as the anguish caused by the passage of time is interrupted, albeit briefly, and the narrator, for once in charge of his own destiny, is able to feel truly himself. Significantly, as at other moments of rupture in Modiano's writing, a feeling of lightness accompanies this escape from the constraints of the quotidian. The theme of the suspension of the flow of time recurs frequently in this novel, in which frozen moments of the Bruder family's past are evoked by means of photographs and in which the narrator's chief aim is to record events for posterity before they are lost forever. Of all Modiano's works, *Dora Bruder* is the most temporally disrupted, as the author extends the number of time frames and moves even more frequently between them than in his other writing. There are nine main time layers, ranging from the evocation of Jean Valjean's flight through Paris<sup>76</sup> to the writer's present, via the Bruder family's history in the 1920s and 30s, the period of the Occupation and intervening moments in the early and late 1960s, in the 1970s and 1980s. Additionally, the narrator's flights and those of Dora are seen in parallel, so that the time difference between the 1940s and the 1960s is eclipsed. The chronological structure of this work, then, differs very significantly from that of the traditional linear narrative, being informed by the twin themes of quest and flight: as the narrator seeks his own identity in that of Dora and compares their experiences of flight, linked to that of Jean Valjean, he tunnels between different time layers, which are juxtaposed rather than treated sequentially. In this novel, then, flight and timelessness are depicted as a valid means of escaping temporarily from anguish and tragedy, which cannot, however, be permanently held at bay.

In much of Modiano's writing, however, the flight into timelessness is portrayed considerably more negatively as a failure to face responsibility and confront the past. This flight from self is given its clearest exposition in *Livret de famille*, where the narrator graphically describes the inner conflict which leads him to flee to neutral territory. Modiano devotes Chapter IX of this book to an elaboration of his concept of this timeless state, which he represents as 'la Suisse du coeur'. Here place is used metaphorically as the landscape reflects the narrator's inner vacuum: 'Je n'avais plus de mémoire. Mon amnésie s'épaissirait de jour en jour comme une peau qui se durcit. Plus de passé. Plus d'avenir. Le temps s'arrêterait et tout finirait par se confondre dans la brume bleue du Léman. J'avais atteint cet état que j'appelais « la Suisse du coeur. »' (p. 118). This metaphor recurs throughout Modiano's fiction, representing the temptation to repress memory and retreat

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<sup>76</sup> In Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*.

into illusion.<sup>77</sup> The fact that memory is imperfect: 'La mémoire elle-même est rongée par un acide' (p. 144) helps to sustain this illusory existence in a world from which reality has been banished: 'tout était mirage, tout était dépourvu de la moindre réalité dans ce pays' (p. 145).

Having devoted a chapter to 'la Suisse du coeur' in *Livret de famille*, Modiano based a later work, *Vestiaire de l'enfance*, entirely around the subject of the flight from self. This novel revolves round a narrator who has fled to an unspecified Mediterranean location strongly reminiscent of 'la Suisse du coeur' to escape from involvement in a past crime. Adopting an assumed name, the narrator seeks to forget his former life by immersing himself in the creation of a nostalgic radio serial set in an imaginary past: *Les Aventures de Louis XVII*. Of all Modiano's novels, *Vestiaire de l'enfance* is the most static, as the narrator retreats to a world in which, to all intents and purposes, time has stopped: 'Ici je suis arrivé au bout du monde et le temps s'est arrêté' (p. 24). Thus, in the absence of forward movement, the narrator's daily routine becomes circular rather than linear. In this timeless state, memory has been suppressed, as the narrator discovers when he tries to reactivate this neglected faculty: 'J'avais perdu l'habitude de ces exercices de mémoire depuis que je vivais dans une sorte d'intemporalité' (p. 40) and the return to the past has been abandoned in favour of an eternal present: 'A quoi bon revenir en arrière quand vous pouvez vivre [...] un présent éternel?' (p. 43). This sterile existence, however, as well as being monotonous, is ultimately unsustainable: as in *Livret de famille*, a chance encounter reawakens memory and leads to a mental exploration of the past. Having, through 'un phénomène de surimpression' (p. 150), been transported back in time to his adolescence in Paris, the narrator becomes aware of the necessity of confronting his past, however painful this may prove: 'il faut essayer de trouver les personnes et les objets perdus' (p. 130). The ensuing escape from stasis into retrospection opens the door to possible future progress in the identity quest, which has been stalled in the interim. In *Vestiaire de l'enfance*, then, as in *Livret de famille*, the flight into timelessness is presented in entirely negative terms. By depicting the narrator as one of a group of expatriates, all of whom are fleeing a contaminated past, Modiano clearly links his personal search for self with that of the children of the Vichy generation, thereby giving a wider social resonance to his exposure of the nefarious effects of the repression of memory.

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<sup>77</sup> See, for example, the references to Switzerland in *De si braves garçons* (p. 45), *Des Inconnues* (p. 39, pp. 98-9) and *Un cirque passe* (p. 48) and to the Engadine in *Une jeunesse* (pp. 46, 58), *Villa triste* (p. 191) and *Accident nocturne* (p. 19).

Modiano's negative depiction of flight in *Vestiaire de l'enfance* has a significant effect on the novel's narrative structure, which differs markedly from that of *Dora Bruder*. Whereas the latter, as noted above, is characterised by constant movement between a large number of time layers, the former is considerably more static: only two main periods are evoked at any length and the focus between prospection and retrospection shifts less frequently than in the majority of Modiano's novels. Clearly, Modiano departs from his normal narrative practice in this work in order to emphasise the dangerously stultifying effects of the repression of memory on identity formation. Stasis dominates the first half of the novel, which depicts a period of some weeks in the narrator's life in his chosen place of refuge. In spite of occasional references to the passage of time, such as 'Une dizaine de jours plus tard' (p. 26), the emphasis is on repetition, as in the narrator's description of his annoyance at being forced every morning to witness the gymnastics of a man who lives in the flat across the road (pp. 17-19). Even the slight narrative element, concerning the narrator's gradual acquaintance with a girl who seems familiar (and who will eventually be the catalyst in awaking his repressed memory) involves repetition: 'Nous nous sommes assis au fond de la salle, à la table où je l'avais remarquée la première fois. Elle a posé son sac de paille à côté d'elle, sur la banquette en moleskine rouge. J'avais l'impression de revivre la même scène. J'étais revenu en arrière dans le temps'(p. 35). Thus circularity characterises his monotonous existence, negating forward movement. Retrospection is minimal in this part of the text, being confined to a few veiled references to the narrator's past existence as a well-known author: 'je suis venu m'exiler ici pour m'alléger d'un poids qui augmentait au fil des années et d'un sentiment de culpabilité que j'essayais d'exprimer dans mes livres. Coupable de quoi?'(p. 51). As the halfway point of the novel approaches, however, an adolescent trip by the narrator to Vienna is evoked (pp. 63, 65), paving the way for the dramatic change of focus which occurs in the middle of the book, when an unbidden image projects him back into a period in his late teens, centred round his mother's dressing room in a Paris theatre. The second half of the novel consists of alternating episodes of retrospection and prospection, in which there is a contrast between the narrator's evocation of his adolescence and his continued refusal to engage with the traumatic events of the intervening period. As he continues to refuse to acknowledge his true identity, his inner sense of vacuum increases: 'La sensation de vide m'a envahi, encore plus violente que d'habitude'(p. 101). This oscillation between past and present finally appears to bear fruit, however, when the narrator interrupts his 'interminable feuilleton historique'(p. 11) in favour of a different type of broadcast consisting of an appeal for information about the past. Although this message concerns an incident in 1965, the period

to which the narrator has returned in memory, its format is modelled on the appeals sent out by the French resistance, so that, as elsewhere in his fiction, Modiano conflates the 1960s and the 1940s. This change in the narrator's behaviour, induced by his mental return to the past, appears to be a turning point: his inner vacuum is replaced by 'une sensation de légèreté, comme après avoir rompu une dernière entrave'(p. 135) and he feels as if he is on the threshold of a new life: 'pour la première fois, depuis longtemps, j'assistais au début de quelque chose'(p. 138). As elsewhere in Modiano's writing, however, this feeling of euphoria is depicted as transient: at the end of the novel, the narrator is once more engulfed by the void. In the absence of narrative closure, circularity prevails over linearity. A careful re-reading of the opening paragraph of the novel, in which the narrator's present is very briefly evoked before the events of the first part of the book are framed as having taken place at an earlier period, demonstrates that he is still writing the same historical broadcast and has therefore not succeeded in escaping from the past. The short section in the early part of the novel (p. 44) in which he describes a putative future in which he will abandon his radio career in order to write a book about the history of the town thus remains highly ambiguous: is it merely wishful thinking or does it point towards a future engagement on his part with the past, which may ultimately prove redemptive?

*Dora Bruder* and *Vestiaire de l'enfance* thus each embody a different concept of flight, flight as liberation in the former case and flight as the negation of self in the latter instance. In both works, flight introduces timelessness into the narrative but whereas in *Dora Bruder* this escape from time is presented positively, as both Dora and the narrator experience brief moments of respite, in *Vestiaire de l'enfance* it is negative, appearing as a prolonged period of unproductive stasis. As described above, the structure of each of these novels is significantly influenced by the nature and duration of these timeless episodes. The majority of Modiano's novels lie between the extremes represented by these two works, combining in varying proportions the positive and negative aspects of flight which I have outlined. Their structure is thus informed not only by the complex interplay between prospection and retrospection discussed in the previous section, but also by the frequency and the quality of the timeless interludes introduced into the narrative by the theme of flight.

Whereas Modiano's work is characterised by a tension between positive and negative depictions of flight, Duras inclines much more heavily in one direction: that of the portrayal of the flight into the heart of the unknowable as a highly desirable if ultimately dangerous experience. The opposite phenomenon, the flight away from this experience, is rarely described, the exception being the evocation of Lol's refusal to confront past trauma

in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*. In this novel, there is a clear contrast between negative and positive flight, as Lol's state of denial about the events of the ball at S. Tahla is superseded by her later decision to immerse herself in the obsessive recreation of this occasion. As noted in the previous section, Duras's portrayal of negative flight in this novel closely resembles that of Modiano: the almost catatonic state in which Lol passes the 10 years of her life as a model housewife in U. Bridge is strongly reminiscent of the narrator's situation in *Vestiaire de l'enfance*. In both cases, stasis and circularity replace linearity as the frozen subject, having blocked out the past, is trapped in a cycle of endless repetition. As in *Vestiaire de l'enfance*, this state of denial cannot be maintained indefinitely: Lol's husband is depicted as awaiting 'le premier craquement des glaces de l'hiver' (p. 34). Lol's 'virtualité constante et silencieuse' (p. 33) finally gives way when the couple return to S. Tahla, where past memory is reactivated, breaking the spell. Both authors draw on the fairy tale to reinforce their portrayal of the suspension of memory: Duras's use of the language of children's stories in the phrase: 'Dix ans de mariage passèrent' (p. 34) evokes the Sleeping Beauty myth, which is overtly referred to by Modiano on several occasions in the context of the flight from self.<sup>78</sup> In marked contrast to *Vestiaire de l'enfance*, however, where, as we have seen, stasis dominates the first half of the novel, little space is devoted to the depiction of this state in *Le Ravissement of Lol V. Stein*: The detailed description of Lol's state of suspended animation takes up a mere five pages, whereas her flight into the excessive experience of the ball occupies the majority of the novel.<sup>79</sup>

Elsewhere in Duras's *oeuvre*, the negative treatment of flight recedes in the face of its more positive depiction as an escape into a new mode of existence, a theme which dominates the novels of her second phase of writing (as defined in the previous section): as Micheline Tison-Braun observes when discussing Duras's writing, 'Il faut fuir pour vivre'.<sup>80</sup> There is considerable variation in the types of flight portrayed but they are linked by a movement away from the conventional social world towards a closer union with nature, the universal and the absolute which involves a profound reappraisal of selfhood. I now wish to examine different articulations of the theme of flight in two novels from this period, *L'Après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas* (1962) and *Le Vice-consul* (1966). I shall argue that contrasting representations of flight in these novels inform their structure, introducing circularity, parallelism and stasis which disrupt the linear narrative.

<sup>78</sup> See, for example, *Fleurs de ruine*, p. 16 and *La Petite Bijou*, p. 89.

<sup>79</sup> See *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, pp. 32-6 and 37-191.

<sup>80</sup> *Marguerite Duras*, p. 10.



Two opposing types of flight into a new mode of existence are depicted in *L'Après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas*. The first, which is involuntary, concerns the banishment of an old man by his daughter to an isolated house in a forest while the second, which is voluntary, involves the daughter's immersion in a passionate love affair with a local builder in the village below. The novel revolves round the contrast between these two destinies, as the father, Monsieur Andesmas, follows his daughter Valérie's escapade from his eyrie in the forest. By choosing to relate the story from the father's point of view, Duras places the emphasis on his flight; that of his daughter is more lightly delineated but echoes the amorous adventures of many of the writer's protagonists. Significantly, Monsieur Andesmas himself provides the third person necessary to complete the Durassian triangle, in which the love affair requires a witness. Unable any longer to participate actively in lovemaking, he accepts the role of observer: 'M. Andesmas consentit à ne plus connaître d'autre aventure que celle de l'amour de Valérie' (p. 40). Thus the two contrasting flights are linked. The old man's feeling towards his daughter are profoundly ambivalent as, reduced by old age to a state of immobility and powerlessness, he watches her dancing frenetically with her lover at the village ball (which is reminiscent of the ball at S. Tahla): 'Solitaire, et désormais impuissant à faire danser ce corps ruiné, désormais, il n'empêchait qu'il reconnaissait l'attrait de la danse, son irrésistible urgence, son existence parallèle à sa fin' (p.22). While sympathetic to her passion, he feels excluded from her world and is also irritated by the disruptive effect of her conduct on his life: the builder detained by Valérie is consequently very late for an appointment with Monsieur Andesmas, who can do nothing but wait.

The narrative structure of *L'Après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas* is heavily influenced by the contrasting modes of existence of the father and daughter, in which stasis and movement oppose each other. The action of the novel takes place over a short period of some three hours on a Saturday afternoon in June and is set in the primitive space of the forest, whose immobility reflects that of the old man: 'Autour de M. Andesmas la forêt se dresse immobile' (p. 19). This stillness contrasts sharply with the bustle of the village, which Monsieur Andesmas can observe from his balcony. As well as this primary opposition between immobility and movement, there is also a tension in the text between the passage of time and its suspension. Time references punctuate the novel, from the builder's failure to arrive at the appointed time of 3.45 at the outset of the story to the moment near its end when Valérie's car, bringing him to the delayed meeting, is seen to have left the village square at 6.10. In contrast, the old man, no longer able to influence the course of events, experiences time as elastic: he retreats into reverie, thinks of death and

takes frequent naps. The arrival of the builder's retarded daughter with a message from her father further reinforces the atmosphere of timelessness: her game with a coin given to her by the old man, which she repeatedly drops, forgets and rediscovers, introduces circularity into the narrative. As the afternoon wears on, Monsieur Andesmas perceives time as slowing down: 'Il était inutile de se cacher que des heures plus ralenties, plus étalées, faisaient place à celles, fixes, des premières de l'après-midi'(p. 73). Thus, within a defined time frame, Duras introduces a subjective portrayal of time which conveys the old man's changing states of mind. This altered perception of the passage of time is emphasised at the end of the novel, where the short timespan involved is drawn out: 'M. Andesmas croit être sorti d'une sieste de plusieurs années'(p. 126). In this work, in which Duras skilfully opposes two different types of flight, no real narrative closure is achieved: the old man's isolation will presumably end in death, the ultimate flight beyond time, while his daughter, who, significantly, bears Lol V. Stein's middle name, will continue to immerse herself in the timelessness of the erotic encounter. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the novel is ambiguous: it can be read at once as an indictment of patriarchy and as a sympathetic portrayal of old age. I now wish to consider another novel, *Le Vice-consul*, which is structured round three contrasting but complementary depictions of flight.

As Victoria Best has observed, *Le Vice-consul* is triangular in focus, being based round a series of transgressions committed by the three central characters, the beggarwoman, the vice-consul and Anne-Marie Stretter.<sup>81</sup> The initially separate destinies of these three protagonists become intertwined as their paths cross in Calcutta, the end point of their very different journeys. It is not difficult, therefore, to identify Calcutta, as Noëlle Carruggi has done, as representing 'la douleur de l'Inde',<sup>82</sup> of which the three central characters represent different facets. In this reading, the beggar's flight into destitution embodies the Indian condition while the transgressive behaviour of the vice-consul and Anne-Marie Stretter reflect differing reactions to the scandalous nature of this extreme poverty, the violence exhibited by the former contrasting with the resigned comprehension of the latter. In opposition to the indifference of their colleagues, the unorthodox behaviour of these two members of the diplomatic circle is instrumental in breaking down 'l'étanchéité entre l'Inde blanche et l'Inde coloniale'.<sup>83</sup>

Transgression and flight, then, link the three main protagonists: the beggar girl, having become pregnant at the age of seventeen, is forced to flee by her family, the vice-

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<sup>81</sup> *Critical Subjectivities*, p. 207.

<sup>82</sup> *Marguerite Duras*, p. 79.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*,

consul first flees France to escape from a violent past before being led into further violence and flight while in India, and Anne-Marie Stretter, whose past is marked by her flight from a former marriage, periodically escapes from convention into transgressive behaviour. I shall now examine each of these flights in turn, commenting on its nature and its effect on the narrative structure of the novel.

The flight of the young beggar with which the novel opens differs from that of the other protagonists in that it is involuntary: the girl is rejected by her family. She is also distinguished from the other two central characters by her namelessness, which reinforces her archetypal status. Unlike them, her story is conjectural, being recreated retrospectively by Peter Morgan, an English resident of Calcutta whose background presence throughout the novel links the three tales of transgressive flight. Her depiction, therefore, is more complex than that of the vice-consul and Anne-Marie Stretter, consisting of several interwoven strands: the girl is at once Duras's *alter ego*, an archetype and the vehicle for a meditation on the nature of the self.

The character of the beggarwoman is modelled on an incident from the author's childhood, which first appears in her early novel *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*.<sup>84</sup> This episode, in which a beggar sells her baby to a white woman, resurfaces in *Le Vice-consul*, where the characters of Duras and her mother are clearly recognisable in the depiction of the family who adopt the baby. Thus there is *dédoublement*, as the writer is present as 'l'enfant blanche' (p. 56) at the same time as projecting her own teenage rebellion onto the figure of the beggar girl, who has been rejected by her mother. In the two mother-daughter pairs, a cruel mother and a rebellious daughter are shadowed by a good mother and a subservient daughter. Duras's own ambivalent feelings towards her mother, examined at greater length in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, are clearly echoed by the beggar, who describes her mother as 'la vieille mère du Tonlé-Sap, origine, cause de tous les maux, de sa destinée de travers, son amour pur' (p. 67). Circularity is introduced into the narrative at an early stage by this ambiguity, as the girl is torn between the need to flee and the desire to return home. Although convinced that 'Sa route [...] est celle de l'abandon définitif de sa mère' (p. 28), she cannot bring herself to head directly away from home, but circles round her native village for some time before finally leaving the area in which she was born for India.

As the novel progresses, however, these autobiographical elements give way to the archetypal. The veracity of the episode of the sale of the child is subsequently undermined as Peter Morgan, having cited Anne-Marie Stretter (another Durassian *alter ego*) as the

<sup>84</sup> It is instructive to compare *Un barrage contre le pacifique* pp. 103-5 with *Le Vice-consul* pp. 54-64.

source of the story, admits that it cannot relate to the beggarwoman: 'Les dates ne coïncident pas. La mendiante est trop jeune pour être celle qu'a vue Anne-Marie Stretter' (p. 72). The girl gradually loses her individuality, becoming a metaphor for the fate of very poor women in the Third World: she experiences extreme hunger, abandons her unwanted offspring, becomes sterile and loses her reason. Her flight, which dominates the early part of the novel, comes to a halt approximately one third of the way through the book, when she arrives in Calcutta after a ten-year Odyssey. Now reduced to an animal state, she has lost both her memory and her sense of self and has entered a state of stasis and circularity. Henceforth, her disturbing presence reappears at intervals, a spectre at the feast of the colonial elite. On the night of the reception at the French embassy in Calcutta, she waits to be fed in the street outside: 'Sous le lampadaire, grattant sa tête chauve, elle, maigre de Calcutta pendant cette nuit grasse, elle est assise entre les fous, elle est là, la tête vide, le coeur mort, elle attend toujours la nourriture' (p. 149).

Paradoxically, however, Duras endows this portrait of human abjection with a mythical and philosophical dimension which gives it a redemptive quality. Thus the girl's flight, though imposed on her, is at the same time seen to be willed, as she embraces the union with the unknown: 'Je voudrais une indication pour me perdre' (p. 9). Her flight has overtones of a mystical initiation as she journeys into dispossession, an interpretation which is reinforced by Duras's occasional use of religious terminology: the girl is twice described as 'une bonzesse sale' (pp. 17, 204). The length of journey suggests a gradual apprenticeship into a new state of existence in which individual identity is dissolved. As personality recedes, memory and language are replaced by song, which as Carruggi notes, symbolises a return to the origins of life: 'Battambang n'est pas seulement chant du retour aux origines enfantines, mais chant incantatoire célébrant le mystère de l'origine des origines, un éternel retour, le cycle immuable de la vie et de la mort' (p. 145). When the beggarwoman reappears in the final pages of the novel, she inaugurates this new cycle, which has now superseded the linear narrative.

The vice-consul's story, which initially appears in counterpoint to that of the beggarwoman, intercalated between two sections of her flight, subsequently displaces it as the novel's centre of gravity: the latter two-thirds of the book revolve round the tale of his transgression. In contrast with the beggar, Jean-Marc de H. is male, patrician and named, though his incomplete surname suggests an only partially resolved identity. Unlike her, he is not archetypal, but he shares with her both an unhappy family background and a tendency towards self-destruction. Song links the two characters: the beggarwoman's

refrain of 'Battambang' is echoed by the vice-consul's frequent whistling of 'Indiana's Song', a melody learnt in childhood which symbolises his love for India.

Jean-Marc de H.'s flight is twofold: he first flees the bourgeois milieu in which he was brought up for India, only to be forced to abandon his post as vice-consul in Lahore as the result of a crime involving shooting lepers in a local park. At the time of the narrative, his future is in the balance and his scandalous and inexplicable conduct is the talk of Calcutta. The vice-consul is a fairly rare example in Duras's *oeuvre* of a man whose behaviour mirrors that of the Durassian heroine: like Anne Desbaresdes, Lol V. Stein and Claire Lannes, he forsakes convention and becomes immersed in an extreme, incomprehensible act. His nature, however, is characterised by a greater degree of overt violence than that of his female counterparts: he is described as having indulged in teenage vandalism in France and his random killing of lepers in Lahore is paralleled by shooting at himself in his mirror. These destructive tendencies are perceived as dangerous by his superiors, who, discussing his future, seek to protect him from himself: 'Les deux hommes cherchent quoi faire de Jean-Marc de H., où l'affecter, dans quel climat, sous quel ciel, afin de le mettre à l'abri de lui-même' (p. 43). Although differentiated from the Durassian heroine by this greater propensity towards violence, the vice-consul shares with her an inability to articulate the reasons for his conduct, which are shrouded in mystery: 'Je ne peux pas m'expliquer [...] sur ce que j'ai fait à Lahore' (p. 39). Thus the central event of the narrative remains devoid of meaning, an absence around which the text circles.

The vice-consul's story, then, having replaced that of the beggarwoman as the focus of interest, itself becomes circular as it is revealed that his behaviour cannot be explained. In the central part of the novel, a stark contrast arises between the endless but pointless speculation indulged in by the white community in Calcutta, introduced by the frequent repetition of the phrase 'on dit', and the complicity between the vice-consul and Anne-Marie Stretter, who are alone in recognising 'le côté inévitable de Lahore' (p. 127). The polarisation between the two groups reaches its peak at the embassy reception, which has overtones of the ball at S. Tahla in *Le Ravisement de Lol V. Stein* and culminates in Jean-Marc de H.'s ostracism by the colonial community. After this defining moment, the vice-consul is consigned to limbo. Although Anne-Marie Stretter succeeds in awakening love in him for the first time in his life: 'c'est la première fois de ma vie qu'une femme m'inspire de l'amour' (p. 172), his feelings for her are not reciprocated and, at the end of the novel, he is consigned to timelessness. When discussing his next posting with a friend, he describes it as follows: 'Je pense que ce sera quand même Bombay. Je m'y vois, indéfiniment photographié sur une chaise longue au bord de la mer d'Oman' (p. 212). Carruggi

considers this photographic immobilisation as a symbolic killing of the vice-consul by the author.<sup>85</sup>

Anne-Marie Stretter differs from the beggarwoman and the vice-consul in being completely named, which suggests that she both retains her individuality and feels secure as to her identity. She shares, however, some characteristics with the beggarwoman, having archetypal status as a Durassian *femme fatale* who is worshipped as a priestess by the men she enchants. Her flight is less recent than that of the other two protagonists, having taken place seventeen years before the events described in Calcutta, but parallels that of the beggar, in that both followed similar trajectories from Indochina to India. She can be seen as a bridge between the figures of the beggarwoman and the vice-consul in that she has come to an accommodation with India, where she leads a dual existence. At the same time as being an exemplary ambassador's wife, she periodically escapes into another world more attuned to the Indian experience. Having overcome the temptation to commit suicide, she has attained a state of calm in which she has reconciled her social duties within the white community with an openness to the spirit of India. Thus, in spite of her unorthodox lifestyle, she is able to command a respect not accorded to the vice-consul: 'Un seul regard et les portes de la blanche Calcutta doucement cèdent' (p. 107).

Anne-Marie Stretter's role in the narrative is that of a mentor who initiates Jean-Marc de H. into the mysteries of Indian life. In this capacity, she affirms his action: 'Je suis avec vous ici complètement comme avec personne d'autre, ici ce soir, aux Indes' (p. 144), while at the same time reassuring him that he does not need further help from her: 'Vous n'avez besoin de rien' (p. 128). She also incarnates a more measured response to the horrors of Indian destitution than the angry reaction of the vice-consul, whose behaviour, at times bordering on madness, makes him a figure of fun. Her dignity and sorrow, characterised by frequent tears, contrast with his clown-like image: she says of herself: 'Je pleure sans raison que je pourrais vous dire, c'est comme une peine qui me traverse' (p. 198), while he describes himself as 'un clown qui se réveille' (p. 127).

After the embassy reception, the character of the narrative changes, as Duras both draws together the three protagonists and introduces timelessness in the place of narrative closure. Anne-Marie's withdrawal to a nearby island with a coterie of close friends represents a flight from the social obligations of Calcutta. Although the vice-consul is excluded from this escape, his presence is still felt and Anne-Marie finally acknowledges an affinity with him, admitting that they resemble each other. The beggarwoman also reappears at this point, having followed the group from Calcutta. Music provides a unifying

<sup>85</sup> Marguerite Duras, p. 81.

element, as Anne-Marie's piano playing echoes the songs of the other two characters. The novel ends with an implied fusion between the two female characters, as both swim in the lagoon at the same time, Anne-Marie Stretter for pleasure and the beggarwoman, who is hunting for fish, for survival. Thus the three contrasting but parallel flights are linked, as narrative closure is replaced by a return to timelessness, with overtones of death: at the close of the novel the beggar and Anne-Marie Stretter remain asleep on the island, while the vice-consul is pictured endlessly reclining in a deckchair on the Indian shore.

Duras, then, makes skilful use of contrasting types of flight in the context of the exploration of the nature of identity which is central to her fiction. The flight from convention into the heart of a radically new way of living predominates, disrupting linearity, which is replaced by the circularity of the *éternel retour*.

Darrieussecq, like Duras, represents the flight into the *entre-deux* as a necessary part of the search for self. This positive depiction of flight is strongly in evidence in her first two novels: the central character's reappraisal of her femininity in *Truismes* springs from her metamorphosis into a sow while the narrator's unexpected desertion by her husband in *Naissance des fantômes* precipitates her into a limbo in which she is forced to reassess her identity. In *Le Mal de mer*, however, the picture becomes less clear, as the mother's enigmatic flight from her husband, while containing elements of initiation into a new future, also illustrates the negative consequences of the flight from the *non-dit*: whereas the mother is free to reinvent herself, her daughter has been abandoned. This more negative portrayal, reminiscent of Modiano's flight from painful memory, predominates in the next two novels, counterbalancing the greater optimism of the earlier works. Thus *Bref séjour chez les vivants* and *White* both revolve round the protagonists' unsuccessful attempts to escape from the consequences of past family tragedy. In her most recent novel, *Le Pays*, however, Darrieussecq returns to the positive, depicting her narrator's return from Paris to the land of her birth as a quest leading to new beginnings rather than as a flight. For Darrieussecq, then, flight has both a positive and a negative dimension. The flight into the *entre-deux* and the flight from the *non-dit*, are, however, linked in that they involve an escape into a new time and space as the protagonists either endeavour to free themselves from the constraints of the quotidian or attempt to hold painful memories at bay. An examination of these contrasting types of flight in *Naissance des fantômes* and *Bref séjour chez les vivants* will illuminate the effects on the narrative of the protagonists' changing temporal and spatial awareness.

The originality of *Naissance des fantômes* resides in the author's unusual depiction of the physical world, as she describes the narrator's escape from the contingency of the

here-and-now into an altered, dematerialised universe, a space-time continuum in which she is able to reclaim her submerged identity. The novel consists of three phases: a brief initial period in which the narrator is still caught up in the everyday world, a longer period in which she oscillates between two different apprehensions of reality and a final period in which she enters a radically new state of being as a prelude to a new stage in her life. Darrieussecq's extremely interesting use of different past tenses to symbolise these contrasting modes of existence will be discussed in detail in the next chapter. Here I shall restrict myself to an examination of the narrator's developing perception of time and space throughout the novel.

In *Naissance des fantômes*, Darrieussecq imaginatively explores the physics of absence. The husband's unexplained departure from the marital scene at the outset of the novel opens up a space in which the wife is obliged to renegotiate her sense of self, abandoning *l'amour-fusion* in favour of autonomy. The painfully dull world inhabited by the couple is summed up by the wife's reference to the 'quotidienneté consternante' of her husband's dream life (p. 45). After his disappearance, the narrator's friend Jacqueline, from whom she gradually becomes estranged, continues to represent all that is down-to-earth: she is described as having 'cet air de certitude qui me fait toujours douter' (p. 74). For the abandoned wife, however, slippage occurs, described as 'un glissement' (p. 51) and 'un dérapage dans l'espace-temps' (p. 20), as an altered view of reality displaces previous certainties. The effect on the narrator of being caught between two irreconcilable modes of perception is dramatic: she describes herself as 'à demi paralysée par le choc de ces deux réalités si différentes, si inexplicablement différentes' (p. 25). The central part of the novel is devoted to an examination of this painful state of oscillation, charting how the narrator gradually fills the vacuum left by her husband's departure. As she reappropriates notions which she has been forced to discard, such as her belief in ghosts, the 'miettes du réel' (p. 26) of her conventional past are swept away. On the liminal zone of the beach, to which she retreats to contemplate her new state, the elements merge and material reality dissolves. After this dematerialisation of the familiar world, a new apprehension of the universe, a 'solidification du vide' (p. 86), can be arrived at, in which the husband finally reappears as a non-threatening, ghostly presence, who can be reabsorbed into her life. His absence is graphically described, using the language of astrophysics, as the catalyst which imbues the narrator with a new dynamism, enabling her to change the direction of her life as she embarks on a new career as a writer: 'Au lieu de mettre à plat mon expérience, l'écrire me la renvoyait comme une balle en pleine face, chargée exactement de l'énergie vampirique



(une anti-énergie comme une anti-matière de trou noir) qu'avait injectée dans mes veines l'absence de mon mari' (p. 115).

Clearly, although a narrative thread links the husband's disappearance and reappearance, the altered mode of perception which contests and finally displaces the conventional depiction of space and time calls into question the traditional linear novel. As mentioned in the previous section, circularity is introduced into the narrative through retrospection, which vies with prospection in the central section of the novel, where the narrator re-examines her life with her husband as she attempts to come to terms with his absence. The oscillation between two alternating perceptions of reality which persists throughout the main part of the narrative also disrupts linearity. Quite early in the novel, Darrieussecq introduces the motif of the spiral to symbolise the tension between these two contrasting states. The narrator, reminiscing about her childhood fear of the dark as she lies awake, waiting for her husband's return, evokes memories of ghosts which were dispelled when the bedroom light was turned on, only to reappear later:

On commence à croire à la présence des ombres, et les ombres se nourrissent de ce soupçon; leur réalité gagne, et leur présence devient bientôt une évidence. Rallumer la lumière, c'est admettre leur existence, de même, dans le noir, garder les yeux ouverts. Déjà, petite, savoir ma mère dans la pièce à côté ne m'empêchait pas d'entrer dans la spirale (p. 42).

After her husband's disappearance, the wife is able to return to this spiral state, in which reality is perceived in two different ways, according to the circumstances. At the end of the novel, by which time a new apprehension of the world has largely displaced the mundanity of the here-and-now, the figure of the spiral is further developed. As the narrator returns from the frontier zone of the seashore and climbs the stairs towards her flat, she apprehends the shadowy figure of her husband awaiting her above. At this point, the universe is transformed: the spiral staircase she is ascending becomes absorbed into an infinite regression of spirals, which Darrieussecq represents pictorially. While the sea laps round the base of the building, the material world dissolves as the narrator is absorbed into the insubstantial but highly-charged presence of her husband: 'je me fondis ainsi dans sa nébuleuse' (p. 161). His evaporation fills her with a surge of energy which will enable her to return to the material world to pursue her literary career: she describes herself, on the final page of the novel, as 'encore chargée de cette énergie qui me donnait des coups dès que je touchais le sommier' (p. 162). Darrieussecq's use of the spiral in this novel, then, is highly original. Having introduced it to depict the alternating states of reality experienced

by the narrator, she extends its significance at the novel's apocalyptic conclusion by using it to conjure up the complexity of a universe beyond the sphere of the quotidian. It can also be seen to represent an optimistic outcome to the identity quest, in which the narrator is filled with a renewed sense of purpose. Narrative closure in the conventional sense is not, however, achieved: the wife's decision to write about her husband's disappearance sends the reader back to the beginning of the novel, which is now revealed to be a partial *mise en abyme*. On subsequent reading, two levels of narrative can be discerned: sections in which the events are recounted as they happened and sections narrated from a later point of view. The alternation of these two perspectives further complicates the narrative structure of this already complex novel.

Whereas, in *Naissance des fantômes*, the escape into a new spacetime is depicted positively, the majority of the protagonists in *Bref séjour chez les vivants* are engaged in a negative flight from the past involving the repression of memory. As the narrative passes between the central protagonists, the reader gains a powerful impression of parallel lives which are occupied to a significant event by strategies to keep memory at bay. Thus the mother immerses herself in household chores, Jeanne uses physical flight in an attempt to distance herself from the past and Anne projects herself into an alien mental world of space invaders. Each of these characters, grappling with the past, experiences time subjectively. The mother's initial reaction to the tragedy involved a denial of the passage of time as she retreated into a 'sieste sans limite' (p. 60). Later she fantasises about being reincarnated as a cat, so that she no longer has to think about the tragedy. In the twenty-four-hour period in which the novel is set, the mother perceives time first as slowing down as the hour at which her son's body was discovered draws near and subsequently as speeding up: after 'les débuts d'après-midi englués', 'le temps file, reparti comme une vieille machine capricieuse' (p. 155). Anne, too, experiences time as stopping in the early afternoon. She talks of 'Le temps des débuts d'après-midi, arrêté à l'horloge, au creux de la poitrine' and wishes that this situation would continue: 'Si ça pouvait s'arrêter pour de bon, juste une seconde, qu'elle respire' (p. 125). In her disturbed mental state, she projects herself into a fourth dimension, beyond space and time, and dreams of a dematerialised state in which she has fused with the universe: 's'atomiser dans la lumière, nulle part et partout, être un filtre à monde, une éponge' (p. 132). Fascinated by research into the workings of the human brain, she imagines herself to be the subject of an operation in which she loses her identity: 'Court circuit. Lignes coupées. Plus de je, plus rien, la pensée qui s'éteint, interrupteur basculé, rat de laboratoire' (p. 112). The linked themes of memory and identity recur, as Anne and Jeanne reminisce about their use of ether to induce amnesia. Jeanne,

whose physical flight has left her in a state of perpetual motion: 'en transit perpétuel, en décalage horaire depuis deux ans' (p. 54), seeks to escape into the 'absence à soi-même' (p. 161) of the cinema, as well as indulging in prolonged periods of sleep. While awaiting her untimely end, trapped in her car which has fallen into a river, she experiences time as elastic and looks back on her childhood experiments with ether as a preparation for just such a moment: 'comme sous éther avec Anne c'était donc un entrainement, ce temps élastique si rapide et si lent' (p. 300).

Thus, against the background of a narrative punctuated by objective time references, as the clock ticks by on the fateful anniversary, a much more subjective view of the nature of time is presented through the eyes of the different protagonists, together with varying apprehensions of the nature of the universe. The theme of dematerialisation and incorporation into another dimension, while less prominent than in *Naissance des fantômes*, subsists in Anne's fantasising about alien abduction and is echoed by the mother's transformation into a seagull with a bird's eye of the scene of the tragedy as well as Jeanne's reification of herself as a piece of furniture. Nore's identification of her father's favourite work of literature as *The Invisible Man* reinforces the theme of disappearance. The compartmentalised world of this novel, in which no direct communication takes place between the characters, each of whom is locked in a private mental universe, gives it a dreamlike quality: Jeanne describes the protagonists as being 'Tous exilés dans une géographie de songe' (p. 96).

Through the character of Nore, the only family member unaware of the tragedy at its heart, Darrieussecq subtly reinforces this portrayal of the subjective apprehension of time in a universe which can be perceived on different levels. At the same time as being depicted as a normal teenager, who goes out with boys and has just learnt to drive, Nore is also a medium-like figure, receptive to the beyond. As she contemplates the sea at high tide, unaware of its significance in bringing back her brother's body, she perceives time as running backwards in a 'film à l'envers' (p. 121). Later, after a period in which time stopped for her, she apprehends it as restarting: 'Le temps s'est remis à couler, le temps auquel on ne pense pas' (p. 146). It is she who, though unaware of her brother's existence, sees his ghost and experiences the dead as 'réinstallés dans des univers parallèles' (p. 280). These intuitive powers distinguish her from the other protagonists, endowing her with a mythical and universal quality: unlike them, she is acutely aware of having had a previous existence. Her affinity with the sea both links her to a more primitive, pre-patriarchal world and suggests that she is a reincarnation of her vanished brother. Her reiterated fantasies of

being possessed of 'Le don d'ubiquité' (p. 210)<sup>86</sup> seem to point to her as incarnating an altered perception of reality in which time and space have fused, while also leading the life of a typical adolescent. In a novel dominated by the negative effects of the flight from the past, Nore can be seen as a refutation of the power of the *non-dit*, demonstrating that the memory of past trauma cannot be completely obliterated.

The depictions of flight in *Naissance des fantômes* and *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, then, differ significantly, the former being positive while the latter is negative. In both cases, however, retreat into the self entails a subjective perception of time, together with an openness to other worlds. Linearity is contested as time is experienced as slowing down, speeding up, stopping or going into reverse. Different apprehensions of reality coexist, introducing parallelism and circularity as the protagonists move between different states of mind. No stable view of the universe is arrived at, so that the notion of narrative closure loses its relevance.

Although Darrieussecq's narratives differ from those of Duras and Modiano in the author's use of fantasy and much greater recourse to the world of science in her depiction of altered states of consciousness, there are considerable similarities in their treatment of the theme of flight in the context of the identity quest. For all three writers, the subjective perception of time engendered by flight disrupts the linear narrative, introducing stasis, parallelism and circularity. Each author links time and space, as flight leads the protagonists into uncharted territories where space and time may fuse. As I have demonstrated, the tension between positive and negative depictions of flight varies considerably: Duras inclines strongly towards the positive, Darrieussecq, to date, has maintained an even balance between the two extremes, while Modiano leans towards the negative. For each writer, however, flight, which, like retrospection, is intimately bound up with identity quest, has a destabilising effect on narrative structure. In the case of Modiano and Darrieussecq, the experience gained as a consequence of flight frequently results in a return to beginnings, as the search for self is restarted. The suggestion of upward movement, as each cycle leads to improved self-knowledge, enables this circular movement to be envisaged in terms of a spiral. Duras, by contrast, does not go back to the start of the quest but takes her protagonists into a new world outside conventional time and space. In this precultural space, circularity prevails over linearity and the individual merges with the elements: Anne-Marie Stretter's death, referred to by the author as a fusion with 'une sorte de mer matricielle',<sup>87</sup> constitutes a return to her origins rather than a suicide.

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<sup>86</sup> See also p. 267.

<sup>87</sup> See Duras and Porte, *Les Lieux de Marguerite Duras*, p. 78.

The search for self, then, does not lend itself to linear narratives but engages the seeker in a memory-driven quest which at times becomes a flight. These two related but opposing movements significantly affect the chronology of the narrative, introducing a new temporal and spatial logic which finds its expression in altered narrative patterns such as those discussed in this chapter. The identity quest, therefore, not only materially affects my chosen authors' choice of genre but also profoundly influences their use of narrative structure. A third effect, that of the search for self on the linguistic areas of pronoun and tense usage will be the subject of the next and final chapter of this thesis.

## Chapter 4: Pronoun Switching and Tense Mixing

Il faut remarquer que les changements d'optique temporels sont souvent associés à des changements dans l'emploi des pronoms.

*Anne Judge<sup>1</sup>*

Et si le passé et le présent se mêlaient?

*Patrick Modiano*

*Quartier perdu, p.87.*

Sommes-nous les mêmes à tous les temps des verbes?

*Marie Darrieussecq*

*Bref séjour chez les vivants, p.96.*

In this chapter I turn my attention to the linguistic sphere in order to explore the connection between the search for self and selected aspects of language usage in the fiction of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq. At first sight, the three writers, whose literary styles are markedly different, would seem to have little in common linguistically. As previously noted, Duras's use of language is characterised by a gradual abandonment of convention in favour of an elliptical and idiosyncratic style representing a distinctive feminine voice. Modiano's style, on the other hand, remains remarkably constant throughout his work and is linguistically conservative: the author has described himself as using 'la langue française la plus classique'.<sup>2</sup> Darrieussecq's writing lies between these two extremes, being considerably more innovative than that of Modiano without displaying as great a degree of stylistic progression as that of Duras.

Beneath these significant stylistic differences, however, common linguistic features can be discerned which, to my mind, are closely linked to the three writers' preoccupation with the identity quest. Foremost among these are two elements, pronoun switching and tense mixing, which are used extensively by Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq and which I have therefore identified as salient linguistic characteristics of the postmodern search for self. I shall now describe these briefly before considering the extent and significance of their occurrence in the authors' novels. Pronoun switching involves an abrupt change of narrative voice, typically but not exclusively between the first and the third person, which alters the focus of the narrative. Tense mixing concerns the juxtaposition of narrative tenses which are not normally found together, such as the *passé*

<sup>1</sup> This remark was made in the context of Duras's *L'Amant* in 'Choix entre le présent narratif et le système multifocal', p. 51.

<sup>2</sup> See Ézine, 'Sur la sellette', p. 5.

*simple* and the *passé composé*, or past and present tenses, destabilising conventional temporal relations within the narrative. In this chapter I argue that pronoun switching and tense mixing are closely connected, each being a manifestation of the shifting perspectives underlying the search for self, in which there is frequent movement between both the subjective and the objective, and the present and the past. Identity is called into question by all three writers by means of variable use of these linguistic devices, which are at times linked to each other. The chapter will be divided into two sections, the first of which will deal with pronoun switching and the second with tense mixing. In each section I shall provide instances of the linguistic feature in question in my chosen authors' fiction, categorising these examples and assessing their relative significance for the three writers. I shall then draw conclusions as to the relationship between these two linguistic elements and my chosen authors' identity quests.

## Pronoun switching

As a prelude to the discussion of pronoun switching in the novels of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq, some brief remarks on the subject of narrative pronouns and narrative voice will be appropriate. Clearly, the nature of the narrative is significantly affected by the author's selection of narrative pronoun. As Benveniste has noted, there is a considerable difference between first-, second- and third-person pronouns: 'dans la classe formelle des pronoms, ceux dits de « troisième personne » sont entièrement différents de *je* et *tu*, par leur fonction et par leur nature'.<sup>3</sup> While the first and second persons are subjective and connected to the present, *je* representing the speaker and *tu* the person addressed, the third person is more distant and objective. As far as narrative voice is concerned, the writer has a choice not only of narrative pronoun but also between extradiegetic and intradiegetic narrative: the narrator may be situated outside the story or within it. Whereas in the former case the narrator's position is clearly heterodiegetic, in the latter case the narrator's degree of involvement in the narrative is variable: the narrative may be homodiegetic, where the narrator appears as a character in the story, or autodiegetic, where there is fusion between the narrator and the subject. Whereas extradiegetic narration lends itself to the use of the third person while intradiegetic narratives normally have first-person narrators, many different narrative permutations are possible, as the ensuing summary of my chosen authors' use of narrative voice will demonstrate.

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<sup>3</sup> *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, p. 256.

While Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq all eschew the use of an omniscient narrator,<sup>4</sup> which is incompatible with the subjectivity inherent in the identity quest, their choice of narrative position varies considerably. Modiano's intensely personal search for self leads him to rely heavily on first-person narrative, while Duras favours the third person and Darrieussecq makes equal use of *je* and *elle*. Of the three writers, Modiano's position is the simplest: having switched from his habitual first-person narrative to the third person in one novel, *Une jeunesse*, he rejects this experiment, reverting to the first person in his subsequent works. The majority of his novels are autodiegetic, though in some cases, such as *Les Boulevards de ceinture*, *Chien de printemps*, *Voyage de noces* and *Dora Bruder*, the subject and narrator are separate. Duras's approach is considerably more complex: first-person narrative, while subsisting in some of her more autobiographical writing, is largely superseded by the third person, as the author develops and refines her portrayal of woman as the unknowable Other. In a minority of texts, such as *Le Marin de Gibraltar* and *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, the female subject is viewed through the eyes of a male, first-person narrator, while in a few late texts, the second person is introduced: in 'Aurélia Steiner' the eponymous narrator invokes her dead father as *vous*, while in *Emily L.* a narratee is introduced between the author/narrator and the third-person heroine. Darrieussecq is even handed in her choice of pronouns, selecting first-person narration for her first two novels, *Truismes* and *Naissance des fantômes*, third-person narration for *Le Mal de mer* and *White* and a combination of the two for *Bref séjour chez les vivants* and *Le Pays*. In spite of the divergence between my chosen authors' use of narrative pronouns outlined above, all three make striking use of pronoun switching to alter the focus in their novels, playing performatively with different narrative positions. Darrieussecq's reliance on this device is more systematic than that of the other two writers and is linked to her innovative use of a single third-person pronoun to refer to different narrators, which I shall term pronoun merging, as well as to her introduction of a split first-person pronoun, the *je clivé*.<sup>5</sup> Duras and Modiano use pronoun switching more sparingly but to considerable effect. A comparison of the three authors' use of pronoun switching in their novels will shed light on the dynamics of each writer's exploration of identity.

Duras makes sustained use of pronoun switching in two major works, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* and *L'Amant*, and transient use of it elsewhere. The overall effect is disruptive, as narrative continuity is broken by an unexpected change of pronoun.

<sup>4</sup> With the sole exception of the ghostly chorus in Darrieussecq's *White*, where the ghosts represent the repressed memories of the central characters.

<sup>5</sup> I have borrowed this term from Patrick Kéchichian, '« Le Pays »: Le « lieu commun des évanouis »', *Le Monde des Livres*, 26 August 2005, in which he derives it from the vocabulary of psychoanalysis.



The different contexts in which this occurs, however, alter its significance, so that it is possible to distinguish three distinct types of pronoun switching in the author's novels. Firstly, the abrupt switching between *je* and *elle* by the autodiegetic narrator of *L'Amant* changes the focus between the subjective self and the self as Other, introducing a dual narrative perspective. Secondly, the movement between first and third person in the case of the homodiegetic narrator of *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* has the effect of undermining the narrative process itself, as Jacques Hold's account of Lol's past is seen to be deeply flawed. Thirdly, the many small instances of slippage between first, second and third persons which abound in Duras's novels reveal the underlying instability of her universe which regularly breaks through to the surface of the texts as the author questions the very nature of individual identity and hints at a collective dimension to selfhood. I shall now examine these different examples of pronoun switching in more detail.

Duras's adventurous use of personal pronouns in *L'Amant* has received considerable critical attention. Hill, for example, devotes several pages to the subject, concluding that the interchangeability of first- and third-person pronouns in this work creates an atmosphere in which 'the relationship between the narrator and her text [...] oscillates ceaselessly between separation and fusion'.<sup>6</sup> It is less often mentioned that the blueprint for this innovative use of pronoun switching can be found in a much earlier text, *La Vie tranquille*, published in 1944, forty years before *L'Amant*. In a thirteen-page section just beyond the halfway point of this novel, the twenty-five-year-old heroine, Françoise, seeing her reflection in the mirror of the hotel room where she has fled after her brother's suicide, suddenly becomes aware of herself as Other. This abrupt change in self-perception is emphasised by pronoun switching: 'Là, dans ma chambre, c'est moi. On croirait qu'elle ne sait plus que c'est d'elle qu'il s'agit' (p. 121). An identity crisis follows, in which she struggles to reconcile her subjective sense of self with an image which undermines it: 'j'ai eu l'impression que la glace contenait toujours dans son épaisseur je ne sais quel personnage, à la fois fraternel et haineux, qui contestait en silence mon identité' (p. 122). She experiences the shadow of madness as recent events become unreal: 'c'était une autre qui les avait vécus' (p. 124), while prebirth memories, 'Des souvenirs d'avant moi' (p. 124), rise to the surface. After a period of meditation, however, she succeeds in reconciling herself with her image: 'je ne suis que celle-ci qui se regarde en ce moment et rien au delà' (p. 126). The cleansing experience of ritual immersion in the sea enables her to face the future with equanimity.

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<sup>6</sup> Marguerite Duras, p. 123.

I have described the above episode from *La Vie tranquille* in some detail because it prefigures Duras's much more extensive use of pronoun switching in *L'Amant*, in which personal identity is also at stake. There is a clear parallel between the scene alluded to above and the narrator's account, near the beginning of *L'Amant*, of her teenage self trying on a man's hat. As she looks at herself in the shop's mirror, she becomes aware of her Otherness, for which the hat becomes a symbol: 'Soudain je me vois comme une autre, comme une autre serait vue, au-dehors, mise à la disposition de tous, mise à la disposition de tous les regards, mise dans la circulation des villes, des routes, des désirs' (p. 20). In both novels, as Anne Cousseau has pointed out, the autodiegetic narrator's attempt to overcome a crisis involving the onset of adulthood leads to a dislocation of her self-image.<sup>7</sup> In the later work, however, the situation is considerably more complex in that the narrative is framed retrospectively and the displacement of narrative focus between *je* and *elle* is sustained throughout the novel. Thus there are three distinct narrative positions: the *je* of the narrator's present or recent past, with which the novel opens and closes and which punctuates the text at regular intervals, the *je* of the fifteen-year-old subject which intervenes on the third page of the text, becoming the dominant voice, and the *elle* which replaces the latter at key moments in the text.

What is the effect of switching between these three distinct narrative voices? As far as the first person is concerned, the juxtaposition between the *je* of the present and that of the past negates the time difference between past and present, giving a sense of immediacy while impairing continuity. The transition from *je* to *elle*, however, (in which the *je* is always that of the past) challenges the easy apprehension of the past, referred to above, introducing objectivity and distance into the narrative. Thus the teenage girl is presented through a double optic, undermining the notion of a stable identity: *je-je* fusion is contested by *je-elle* separation. This theme of separation can be seen to link the third-person episodes, in which the adolescent gradually leaves her childhood behind. The *elle* sections, therefore, can be read as the chronicle of a *rite de passage*, in which the child is initiated sexually, distances herself from her family and leaves home. This interpretation is borne out by the author's use of 'la petite' to describe the teenager at the beginning of the first passage in which the third person is used (p. 29). Slightly later, the seduction is initiated by her enclosure in the Chinese lover's black car, which symbolises her removal from the family: 'Dès qu'elle a pénétré dans l'auto noire, elle l'a su, elle est à l'écart de cette famille pour la première fois et pour toujours' (p. 46). She is now able to observe her mother from a detached point of view: 'elle est devenue spectatrice de sa mère même, du malheur de sa

<sup>7</sup> See Anne Cousseau, *Poétique de l'enfance chez Marguerite Duras* (Geneva: Droz, 1999), p. 272.

mère, on dirait qu'elle assiste à son événement' (p. 73). Her encounter with the initiatory figure of 'La Dame' (clearly Anne-Marie Stretter) is recounted in the third person (pp. 109-11), as is her account of her discussion with the Chinese lover as to their future (pp. 119-21). Finally, *elle* is used for the final separation and journey back to France (pp. 131-41). Thus, alongside her more personal reminiscences of life in Indochina, Duras juxtaposes a more distanced account of the young girl's passage to maturity. Both in content and in tone, the *elle* sections of *L'Amant* are reminiscent of the author's exploration of identity in *Moderato cantabile*, *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* and *Le Vice-consul*, in which the subject, seen from outside, is mysterious. As in these novels, sexual transgression is a catalyst in the search for self.

Duras's use of a shifting narrative perspective in *L'Amant*, introduced through pronoun switching, allows her to play with the figure of the triangle which is central to her depiction of the sexual encounter. By abolishing the narrative *je* in the deflowerment scene, the author can be seen to be involving the reader directly as the third party who witnesses the couple's lovemaking. Subsequently she alters the focus, repositioning the girl as *je* as she imagines herself observing Hélène Lagonelle in the arms of the Chinese lover (pp. 91-2). Later, after a third-person lovemaking scene in which the subject is distanced and objectivised as 'la petite fille' (p. 120), Duras abruptly switches back to the first person, allowing the subject to redefine herself as the lover's child and to suggest the shadowy presence of the younger brother as a stimulus to their lovemaking (pp. 122-3). Thus the roles of the central participants are depicted as fluid: the man from Cholen is both lover and father, the younger brother is also a lover and the teenager's friendship for Hélène has lesbian overtones. The overall effect of Duras's use of pronoun switching in this novel, therefore, is profoundly destabilising. As Best puts it, 'Duras refuses the possibility of a coherent narrative of her life'.<sup>8</sup> Contesting, as we have seen, conventional autobiography, she instead creates a compelling but complex portrait of her adolescent self, in which, by presenting her subject from a shifting perspective, she challenges the notion of the unified self.

Halfway between her first use of pronoun switching in the context of the perception of the self in *La Vie tranquille* and her much more extensive use of this device in *L'Amant*, Duras experimented with a somewhat different use of this linguistic feature. In *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, published in 1964, pronoun switching serves not to question the identity of the subject directly but to cast doubt on the nature of the narrative itself. The subject of this novel, Lol, referred to throughout in the third person, remains a remote,

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<sup>8</sup> *Critical Subjectivities*, p. 99.

enigmatic figure. This radical inaccessibility is, however, compounded by Duras's use of pronoun switching in the context of the narrator. The initial, apparently straightforward use of first-person narrative is rapidly undermined as it becomes apparent near the outset of the novel that the narrator's story is unreliable, depending on hearsay and invention: 'Voici, tout au long mêlés, à la fois, ce faux semblant que raconte Tatiana Karl et ce que j'invente sur la nuit du Casino de T. Beach' (p. 14). There then follows a lengthy section of unmediated narration of Lol's past history, in which an unnamed male character is introduced. When the first-person narrative is resumed, its veracity is repeatedly questioned by the reiteration of phrases such as 'Je vois ceci' (pp. 52, 55) and 'J'invente' (p. 56). The subsequent naming of the male character (p. 74) is closely followed by a narrative coup in which he is identified as none other than the narrator. At this point, the latter's credibility is dealt a fatal blow: Jacques Hold cannot both be an observer, however partial, of events and at the same time be intimately involved in them. As Borgomano observes, by moving to the third person, 'Jacques Hold s'anéantit lui-même comme sujet du discours, donc de la narration'.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the remainder of the novel, fairly rapid alternation between *je* and *il* maintains the ambiguity of the narrator's position, while his unreliability continues to be emphasised by phrases such as 'Je mens' (p. 121). Only towards the close of the book does the third-person incarnation of the narrator finally disappear, followed by a renunciation of falsehood by his first-person counterpart: 'Je ne peux plus mentir' (p. 163). By now, however, the possibility of reconstructing the past has been called into question to such an extent that Lol's very existence, let alone her identity, is in doubt. Duras's use of pronoun switching in this novel, then, is radically destabilising, suggesting that the narrative process itself is flawed.

Elsewhere in Duras's fiction, isolated instances of pronoun switching are frequently to be found, bearing witness both to the author's repudiation of convention and to the inherent but productive instability of her fictional universe. Thus the third-person narrative of an early work, *Un barrage contre le Pacifique*, is disrupted by the first person on several occasions, of which the following is an example:

Il parlait tous les jours à Suzanne des sentiments qu'il éprouvait pour elle. Moi si je l'épouse, ce sera sans avoir aucun sentiment pour lui. Moi je me passe des sentiments. Elle se sentait du côté de Joseph plus fortement que jamais (p. 82).

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<sup>9</sup> Marguerite Duras, p. 55.

This abrupt transition from third to first person and back again and between past and present tenses is profoundly disturbing in an otherwise conservative narrative. In Duras's final reworking of the events of her adolescence, *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*, slippage from the third to the first person is also to be found in the third-person narrator's reference to her brother as '*mon petit frère adoré, mon trésor*' (p. 226, my italics). Examples of third-to second-person switching can be found at the outset of *L'Après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas* and in *Dix heures et demie du soir en été*. In the former novel, an unexpected reference to the house which Monsieur Andesmas has bought for his daughter as '*la tienne*' (p. 16) both briefly changes the focus of the narrative and introduces ambiguity, as the personal pronoun could refer to either father or daughter. In the latter, the switch to the second person by the third-person narrator, Marie, while contemplating her husband's adultery with Claire, suddenly moves her closer to her rival's position: '*Qu'elle est belle. Que tu es belle, Dieu que tu l'es*' (p. 44). All three persons are juxtaposed at the outset of *Le Vice-consul*, where the objectivity of the opening phrase: '*Elle marche, écrit Peter Morgan*' is contested by rapid shifts in narrative perspective: '*Il faut se perdre. Je ne sais pas. Tu apprendras. Je voudrais une indication pour me perdre*' (p. 9). Although the third person is soon re-established as the main narrative pronoun, the fluidity of the beggar girl's identity, suggested by the initial pronoun switching, is reinforced a few pages later, where she again slips into the first person: '*j'échapperai à cette habitude que j'ai de suivre l'eau, je choisirai un endroit avant le Siam et je resterai là*' (p. 12). These examples demonstrate that pronoun switching is a constant in Duras's fiction although its incidence varies considerably from novel to novel. Its systematic and highly innovative use in *L'Amant* and *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* contrasts with its low-level occurrence elsewhere, where small slippages betray fault lines in the more conventional narrative practice of these texts. The overall effect of pronoun switching in Duras's writing is profoundly unsettling, mirroring the author's questioning of the coherence both of the self and therefore, necessarily, of the narrative process.

Modiano, like Duras, makes striking use of pronoun switching but, unlike her, having adopted this linguistic device in his first novel, *La Place de l'étoile*, he largely abandons it thereafter. I shall therefore examine the main instances of pronoun switching in this novel before considering the reasons for the author's decreasing use of this linguistic device in his subsequent fiction. The latter part of Modiano's adventurous literary début is characterised by abrupt and repeated pronoun shifts as the first-person narration of the first half of the book is interrupted in Parts 3 and 4 of the novel by frequent incursions into the second and third persons. Four substantial sections are written in the third person (pp. 121-

5, 128-32, 170-8 and 195-201) and two involve the second person singular (pp. 132-3 and 160-2), while one is in the first person plural (pp. 141-3). These frequent switches in narrative pronoun, which are linked with changes in narrative tense, emphasise the increasingly improbable nature of Raphaël Schlemilovitch's identity quest. As he pursues the Marquise de Fougeire-Jusquiamès, his search for self is portrayed in terms of a courtly romance. In this context the narrator is objectivised in two passages separated by a short subjective section, in which there is a marked contrast between the archaic style associated with the third person: 'Ce soir-là, ils n'allèrent pas converser devant l'âtre comme d'habitude' (p. 128)<sup>10</sup> and the less refined style of the intervening, first-person passage: 'Je ne mérite pas une chambre aussi prestigieuse' (p. 125). The effect of this pronoun switching, which is at once comical and disconcerting, is further reinforced by a subsequent change to the second person, as the narrator addresses himself: 'Une nuit tu quittas la marquise et surpris Gérard, accoudé contre la balustrade du perron' (p. 132). In this passage, which recounts the murder by Schlemilovitch of the Marquise's servant, a former Gestapo man, the mismatch between the familiar pronoun and the continued use of a refined style is particularly flagrant. Pronoun switching in the last section of the novel, while less obviously parodic, is equally destabilising. The unexpected use of the *nous* form at the beginning of Part 4 pluralises the singular subject, suggesting a dual or multiple identity and thus prefiguring the author's subsequent engagement with the collective: 'Notre mère nous attendait, quai Conti. Nous boirions un tilleul menthe en regardant les ombres que projetait aux murs de notre chambre le bateau-mouche. Jamais nous n'avions autant aimé Paris, ni la France' (p. 141). The subsequent shifts between first and third person during Schlemilovitch's interrogation by Israeli security guards mirror the narrator's ambivalent attitude towards the Jewish state. All in all, the frequent instances of pronoun switching which characterise the second half of *La Place de l'étoile* have an extremely disorientating effect on the reader.

Why, having used pronoun switching so dramatically in *La Place de l'étoile*, does Modiano have so little recourse to it in his later writing? It seems to me that the answer to this question can be found in the difference in nature between *La Place de l'étoile* and the author's subsequent novels. If, as I have suggested, *La Place de l'étoile* is regarded as a flamboyant statement of themes prefacing the more sober, autofictional corpus of Modiano's work, the writer's use of pronoun switching in this novel becomes clear. By

<sup>10</sup> As Morris has pointed out (1996, p. 49, note 29), this is an almost exact paraphrase of a passage from Proust's *Le Côté de Guermantes* (See *A la recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1987), II, p. 314).

depicting a Protean hero, Raphaël Schlemilovitch, who embraces in turn the different and often contradictory stereotypes of the French Jew, he undermines the notion of a coherent identity. The pronoun switching which occurs, coupled with the anarchic use of narrative tenses, in the second half of the novel can be seen as a manifestation of the accelerating disintegration of the hero's personality, already suggested earlier in the novel by the figure of the kaleidoscope, which represents the shifting, fragmentary nature of the self.<sup>11</sup> Modiano's adventurous use of narrative pronouns to actualise the fragmentation of the narrative voice in this novel, then, occurs in the context of the deconstruction of the idea of a specifically Franco-Jewish literary identity with which the novel is concerned. Having thoroughly explored this topic in *La Place de l'étoile*, the author was ready to embark on the more personal search for self which makes up the main body of his *oeuvre*.

Modiano's abandonment of pronoun switching as a major device in his fiction after *La Place de l'étoile* springs from a change in the role of the narrator. Whereas the picaresque hero of his first novel adopts and rejects a series of stereotypical identities, the narrator of the later texts is engaged in a search for self which entails a return to the past in order to shed light on the present. In this continual movement between different time periods, the *je* of the present is continually compared with the *je* of the past, leaving little room for objectivisation, which in any case is difficult in the case of Modiano's largely empty narrator (aptly termed the *degré zéro* narrator by Kawakami).<sup>12</sup> Thus instances of first- to third-person movement become increasingly rare, being confined to a few short sections in *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* and a passage in *La Petite Bijou*. In the former novel, the narrator is objectivised in his putative identity as Pedro McEvoy in Chapters XXVI and XXXIV, while in Chapters XXXII and XLIII, a female narrator, identified only as *elle* but connected to Pedro through Denise Coudreuse,<sup>13</sup> hints as to possible future or alternative episodes in Guy Roland's life. Thus narrative instability reflects the uncertain identity of the amnesiac narrator. In *La Petite Bijou*, which, significantly, has a female narrator, there is a clear but brief perception of the self as Other: 'Il me semblait même que je me détachais de moi. C'était simple, il y avait une fille aux cheveux châtons, d'à peine dix-neuf ans, assise ce soir-là sur une banquette du café de la place Blanche' (p. 147). Instead, however, of sustaining the objectivisation of the teenage girl, as Duras did in *L'Amant*, Modiano switches at this point to the second person: 'Tu mesures un mètre soixante et tu portes un pull-over blanc cassé, en laine, à torsades', continuing in this vein

<sup>11</sup> On p. 53 of *La Place de l'étoile* Schlemilovitch's father is described as being the managing director of Kaleidoscope Ltd.

<sup>12</sup> *A Self-conscious Art*, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> A recurrent fictional character who bears a strong resemblance to the writer's mother.

for the rest of the paragraph. This predilection for the interrogatory *tu* or *vous* is in evidence elsewhere in the author's work: in *Villa triste*, the third-person subject, Meinthe, is unexpectedly referred to in the second person on more than one occasion (p. 52, p. 182), while the son repeatedly uses *vous* to describe the father in *Les Boulevards de ceinture* (pp. 107-32, 136-56 and 173-82). In addition to these non-standard uses of narrative pronouns, Modiano twice departs from his customary practice of having a single, first-person narrator. In *Une jeunesse*, he introduces third-person narrative from a dual perspective, so that *il* and *elle* succeed one another, as alternating chapters are presented from Louis' and Odile's points of view. In his next novel, *De si braves garçons*, having reverted to his habitual first-person narrative, he retains a double optic: two of the chapters of this work describing the narrator's schooldays, Chapters II and XIII, are in fact related from the point of view of another ex-pupil, Edmond Claude, while the narrator of Chapter XII is not clearly identified. Modiano, then, does retain some innovative use of narrative pronouns in the main body of his fiction. Narrative instability, however, which is still a major theme, as continued references to the kaleidoscope demonstrate,<sup>14</sup> is conveyed by the constant movement between past and present, reinforced by the use of split and multiple identities, rather than by the extensive use of pronoun switching which characterises *La Place de l'étoile*.

Darrieussecq makes more consistently adventurous use of narrative pronouns than either Duras or Modiano, experimenting with pronoun switching and pronoun merging in all but her first two novels. Three distinct but related types of non-standard pronoun use can be discerned in her work: pronoun switching, pronoun merging and the introduction of the *je clivé*. Whereas the first of these is common to my three chosen authors, the other two are unique to Darrieussecq, indicating her predilection for linguistic innovation in the expression of feminine identity quests. First- to third-person pronoun switching is prominent in *Bref séjour chez les vivants* and *Le Pays*, where the narration shifts constantly between subjectivity and objectivity, and occurs in a somewhat different form in *White*, in which the narrative switches between *nous* and *il/elle* as the central protagonists are presented alternately through the eyes of the chorus of ghosts and extradiegetically. In *Le Mal de mer* and *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, pronoun merging is extensively used, suggesting fusion rather than fission of the narrative voice since a single third-person pronoun is employed to describe several female or male characters who are not clearly differentiated from each other. The fragmented *je clivé*, representing the altered mental state of one of the main characters, first appears in *Bref séjour chez les vivants* and recurs

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, *Accident nocturne*, p. 29.



in *Le Pays*. These three types of innovative pronoun use are not mutually exclusive, but can be combined: all three occur in *Bref séjour chez les vivants* and the first and third are present in *Le Pays*. Rather than considering each type in isolation, therefore, I shall examine Darrieussecq's four most recent novels in turn, commenting on the author's developing use of narrative pronouns in these works.

In *Le Mal de mer*, the writer abandons the straightforward use of first-person narrative of her previous two novels, *Truismes* and *Naissance des fantômes*, in favour of the radically new narrative technique of pronoun merging, in which the third-person pronouns *elle* and *il* are used to describe a number of different, usually unnamed characters. Thus the boundaries between the identities of the main protagonists of each sex are blurred, so that the reader is left to puzzle out which character is being described at any one moment. Before discussing the author's reasons for adopting this highly original narrative procedure and commenting on its effectiveness, I shall provide some examples which will illustrate the nature of the frequent transitions between different narrators which characterise this novel, in which three nameless but related female characters are linked by a single *elle*, while four unrelated males, only one of whom is named, are referred to as *il*.

The narrative of *Le Mal de mer* is symmetrical, opposing female and male characters and thus positing differences in the perception of identity which separate these two groups. This symmetry is emphasised by the juxtaposition of four female and four male protagonists, referred to as *elle* and *il* respectively. Significantly, one of the female characters is not a person but the sea, which, for Darrieussecq as for Duras, represents a powerful feminine force. The primitive power of the sea is personalised at the outset of the novel, when it is referred to as 'une bouche, à demi ouverte' (p. 11), in whose mighty presence observers of the scene are reduced to the impersonal *on* as in 'on monte la dune'. The first use of *elle* later in the same paragraph refers to the Atlantic ocean rather than to the mother and daughter who witness its fury. The *elle* which opens the second paragraph of the novel, however, is clearly no longer the sea but one of its observers, reminiscing on the arduous climb up the sand dunes: 'Elle se remémore la montée' (p. 12), and, by the end of the paragraph, her identity as a child encountering the sea for the first time becomes apparent: 'elle a vu la mer maintenant' (p. 13). In the third paragraph, the mother, introduced as 'sa mère', takes over the narrative halfway through the passage: 'Elle passe la main sur le visage de la petite'. Thus the opening of the book is characterised by a rapid shift in focus from the sea to the child and then to the mother, the central character. During the remainder of the first chapter a pattern of alternation between mother and child is established in which the identity of the *elle* with which the majority of the paragraphs open

shifts regularly. An oblique reference to the third female member of the family, the grandmother (p. 20), sets the scene for the introduction of the fourth narrative *elle* at the beginning of the following chapter.

Darrieussecq's skilful handling of her adventurous narrative technique is well demonstrated in the initial, very long paragraph which opens the second chapter and in which the final member of the *elle* quartet is established as a narrator. It is evident from the wording of the first sentence that the description of the mother meeting her daughter after school before they left Paris for the sea is not extradiegetic but mediated by an as yet unidentified character: 'Elle était exactement comme d'habitude; elle a embrassé la petite, elle a demandé si tout s'était bien passé' (p. 35). Halfway through the paragraph, the *elle* of the observed mother becomes that of the observer: 'elle l'a vue là, sourde, aveugle, livrée' (p. 36). A little later, the juxtaposition of a plural and a singular third-person pronoun finally identifies the observing *elle* as the grandmother: 'Mais elles sont déjà parties. Elle reste là, dans l'appartement vide, dans les hachures des persiennes' (p. 37). Throughout the remainder of the novel, the narrative switches repeatedly between the three family members, the absconding mother, the reluctant daughter and the anxious grandmother, at once uniting and dividing them.

The chain of feminine experience linking the sea, the daughter, the mother and the grandmother is paralleled by a corresponding, though weaker use of *il* to link the main male protagonists. This male/female opposition is introduced in the paragraph following the first appearance of the grandmother, which, unusually, opens with a second-person pronoun: 'Vous pensez à quelqu'un?' (p.39). This sets the scene for the introduction of the detective hired to hunt the fugitives, whose identity can be deduced from the phrases 'on le consulte' and 'Il voit quelques cas de disparitions'. Thus a tension is set up between the hunted females and the male hunters, which is maintained by the detective's reappearance at regular intervals throughout the novel. Three further male presences, the father, the proprietor of the flat rented by the mother and an ice-cream seller at the resort to which they flee, each briefly assume a narrative role, interrupting the predominantly feminine narrative thread of *Le Mal de mer*.

Why does Darrieussecq change her narrative practice in this novel and what is the effect of this radical innovation? By linking her female characters to the sea, she clearly seeks to endow them with an elemental and archetypal dimension which has distinct overtones of Duras's portrayal of feminine identity. The initiation of the daughter by the mother through contact with the ocean, together with the namelessness of the female characters, suggests a return to a primitive, prelogical universe, which contrasts strongly

with a male world dominated by the solving of clues and the re-establishment of the *status quo*. The merging of the female characters has a distinctly cinematic quality as identities fade into each other, again reminiscent of Duras. Paradoxically, however, the blurring of identities has two opposing effects on the reader. Whereas an overall impression of a feminine sisterhood is created, at the same time the abrupt switches of viewpoint also suggest alienation, the bewilderment of the reader echoing that of both daughter and grandmother as they are caught up in events beyond their control. A radical difference between male and female perceptions of identity is hinted at by the much weaker links between the male protagonists and their closer identification with the concrete world of facts and names. This contrast is encapsulated in the novel's double *dénouement*, which is inconclusive for the female characters but brings resolution for the males, underlining the differing nature of their quests for self. After the very subjective portraits of female identity of her first two novels, Darrieussecq's original use of third-person pronouns in this novel reflects a development towards a more global depiction of the feminine and masculine selves as fundamentally opposed to each other.

Darrieussecq experiments still further with narrative pronouns in her next novel, *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, her most innovative work to date both from a narrative and a linguistic point of view. Her continuing use of the new narrative technique adopted in *Le Mal de mer* seems to indicate her satisfaction with it as a means of exploring relationships within the family. The symmetry between male and female which characterises *Le Mal de mer* is, however, replaced in the later novel by a marked shift towards the feminine, as Darrieussecq turns her attention to the effects of a traumatic event on the predominantly female members of the Johnson family. In order to give depth to her portrayal of the web of solidarity which links the feminine protagonists in spite of the fragmentation of the family and their inability to communicate effectively with each other, the author couples the use of pronoun merging, using an undifferentiated *elle* to bind the female members in a sisterhood, with extensive reliance on first- to third-person pronoun switching, so that each family member is presented both objectively and subjectively. She also uses the *je clivé* in the context of feminine identity. These three non-standard uses of narrative pronouns can all be found in the first ten pages of the novel (pp. 7-16), in which the author skilfully conveys both the closeness which exists between the women of the Johnson family and their mental isolation from each other. I shall therefore examine this opening part of the novel in order to elucidate Darrieussecq's handling of all three types of pronoun use referred to above in the context of her exploration of female identity in this novel.

In *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, as in *Le Mal de mer*, the author builds up a chain linking the female members of the family by using the same pronouns to refer to the mother and her three daughters. In each of the short sections into which the novel is divided, the narrative passes to a different protagonist, who is not identified immediately, so that a fading effect is created as the identities of the female family members merge into one another. Male family members are treated somewhat differently: the estranged husband/father makes a single belated appearance in the latter part of the novel (pp. 253-9), his distance from the rest of the family being emphasised by the use of English, his native tongue, in this section, while his replacement, Momo, is excluded from the narrative chain. Within the first ten pages of the novel, the narrative moves first from the mother to the middle daughter, Anne, then to the younger daughter, Nore, then back to the mother and finally to the elder daughter, Jeanne. While this novel differs from its predecessor in that the mother alone remains unnamed, emphasising her archetypal status as the linchpin of the family, the fact that the names of the other characters are provided obliquely rather than directly makes the identification of the shifting narrator problematic. Thus the reader must work hard to identify each subject, who is introduced by either a first- or third-person pronoun at the beginning of each section and from whose stream-of-consciousness narrative the events of the tragedy round which the novel circles must be deduced. By using pronoun switching extensively throughout this novel, Darrieussecq builds up a cross-referenced tissue of family experience, seen both from within and from without, which links the womenfolk of the family. This double optic is introduced gradually: in the first ten pages, the mother remains objectivised as *elle*, (p. 7, pp. 14-15) while Anne, having first appeared as *je*, (p. 8) is subsequently referred to in the third person as her confused mental state, in which she imagines herself recruited by aliens, is evoked: 'Le recruteur viendrait et il la recruterait' (p. 10). Nore, awakening from sleep, initially appears in the third person (pp. 12-14), while Jeanne, engrossed in a similar dream, is referred to as *je*. It is in the context of Jeanne's dreamlike state that Darrieussecq makes her first use of the *je clivé*:

j/e descends lentement, j/e m'étire au soleil, une sorte d'Italie, j/e suis très grande, agrandie de haut en bas m/e dirigeant vers ce point, m/e dirigeant tout à fait normalement et impassiblement vers ce point de ralliement où quelqu'un nous attend (p. 16).

What is the significance of the writer's brief introduction into this novel of the fragmented first-person pronoun? It appears to me that its use here is closely connected to the novel's chronology, discussed at some length in the previous chapter. By juxtaposing short

passages describing the various family members' thoughts and emotions at successive points during a single day, the anniversary of the discovery of the body of the drowned son/brother, Darrieussecq creates a powerful impression of simultaneity. In order to depict Jeanne, who has fled to Argentina to escape the consequences of the tragedy, at the same moment as the French-based family members, who are going about their morning tasks, Darrieussecq portrays her as dreaming. The use of the split pronoun is very effective in conveying Jeanne's slowed-down, altered perception of reality, as she dreams of a mission ending in a meeting, which chillingly foreshadows her fatal encounter with her ghost brother at the end of the novel. The idea of a fracturing of self as a result of the traumatic event which split the family recurs later in the novel when Jeanne recalls a fall she had shortly after her brother's death: 'peu après la mort de Pierre elle était tombée dans l'escalier, j'ai mal au genou avait-elle dit à Delescluze, et lui, «au *je-nous*, j'ai mal au *je-nous* »' (p. 161). Here, the linking of the physical to the psychological is striking: although Jeanne ridicules the explanation provided by the doctor, the harm caused by the loss of the brother is given a bodily inscription.

Different types of non-standard pronoun use, then, are combined to good effect in *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, helping to provide a nuanced and sophisticated portrayal of female identity in a dysfunctional family. The same degree of innovation is not, however, sustained in Darrieussecq's next novel, *White*, which is both simpler in structure and more lighthearted than its predecessor. The narrative in this novel is split between a female and a male protagonist, so that third-person pronoun merging is no longer possible, and the early naming of each character obviates any confusion as to identity. A dual focus is nevertheless retained through the introduction of a chorus of ghosts, whose frequent interruptions punctuate the novel. Representing at once the spirit of the Antarctic and a crystallisation of the protagonists' unsuccessfully banished memories, these intrusive first-person plural presences, identified as 'nous, les fantômes' (p. 20), regularly take over the otherwise extradiegetic narrative, changing its focus. Narrative instability is also evident in a few examples of pronoun slippage, as when Edmée addresses herself in the second person during the uncomfortable sea voyage to the Antarctic: 'Tu savais dans quoi tu t'embarquais. Tu ne peux pas reculer, et c'est très bien comme ça' (p. 18) and Peter describes himself the first person while repairing the station's heating system: 'Quand j'y pense on a des gants intermédiaires' (p. 52). Thus, while considerably less adventurous than its predecessor as regards narrative pronoun use, *White* is nevertheless less conservative in this respect than Darrieussecq's early novels.

The author's continued commitment to narrative experimentation is confirmed in her most recent work, *Le Pays*, where pronoun switching is extensively used and the *je clivé* is more prominent than before. Although she returns to a single subject in this novel, Darrieussecq does not revert to the entirely first-person narrative of *Truismes* and *Naissance des fantômes* but introduces a double optic through *je/elle* alternation, the *je* sections standing out by being presented in bold type. The rapid switching between the first and the third person which characterises this novel appears to spring from its autobiographical nature, thus suggesting a link with *L'Amant*. *Le Pays*, in a striking *mise en abyme*, describes an author's return from France to her birthplace, which bears a strong resemblance to the Basque country, in order to write a book about this experience, entitled *Le Pays*. The first-person sections of the novel describe the narrator's direct apprehension of reality, including reminiscences and family meetings, while the third-person passages seem to represent a more measured view and contain more strictly factual material, together with meditations on a range of subjects. Thus it is not difficult to identify the *elle* sections as a draft of the novel under construction and the *je* passages as a commentary on this process. This identification is borne out when the narrator (in a *je* section) describes herself storing a phrase which has been haunting her in her writer's notebook: 'j'ouvris mon cahier et j'écrivis une phrase qui me tournait dans la tête, une phrase comme un air de chanson: « Il était temps de rentrer au pays.» Ça faisait un programme, un rythme, un horizon, ça faisait une première phrase' (p. 85). This selfsame phrase has previously been used to open the first *elle* section of the book (p. 17). Pronoun switching, then, is used in this novel to differentiate the experience behind the process of writing from the product of this experience.

The *je clivé*, introduced only fleetingly in *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, is put to greater use in *Le Pays* to evoke the mental state conducive to writing and to bridge the gap between the *je* and the *elle* sections of the narrative. In the opening first-person section, the narrator describes how jogging induces a sense of detachment from everyday life: 'J/e courais, devenue bulle de pensée' (p. 12). In this disembodied state, all her worries disappear: 'Le psychologique et l'étatique, le privé et le familial avaient disparu' and her sense of identity changes as she becomes 'Ni moi ni autre ni personne', a state of mind which facilitates writing: 'J/e ne pensais à rien et dans le rien perçaient les phrases, de plus en plus vite' (p. 14). A further instance of dissociation occurs during the flight from France to her new home, when the narrator, looking at her reflection in the plane window, again perceives herself differently: 'J/e me diffuse... J/e me regarde assise dans l'avion, j/e me regarde à travers le hublot. Le temps se dédouble' (p. 42). Considerably later in the novel,

the *je clivé* is referred to in a third-person passage, where it is described as 'Un sujet ni brisé ni schizoïde, mais fendu, décollé'. The fluidity between first and third persons which underlies the novel is then reinforced by a subtle change in verb endings: 'J/e courais, devenue bulle de pensée. La route était libre, j/e courait. J/e devenait la route, les arbres, le pays' (p. 211, my emphasis). The dreamlike state associated with the split subject is now envisaged as a launch pad for the experience of writing: 'Un pas de tir, voilà d'où j/e venait'. Thus Darrieussecq significantly extends her use of the *je clivé* in this novel, combining it with pronoun switching in her exploration of the nature of the writing process.

Darrieussecq's use of non-standard narrative pronouns, then, increases both in frequency and in sophistication throughout her novels, demonstrating her inclination towards linguistic innovation in her exploration of the female self. In this respect, her writing contrasts with that of Modiano, who, having made florid use of pronoun switching in his first novel, makes little further use of it in his intensely personal identity quest. Duras's use of pronoun switching, most noteworthy in *L'Amant*, is spread quite evenly throughout her writing. All three writers make significant non-standard use of narrative pronouns as part of their search for self, although the depiction of the self as Other is less in evidence in Modiano's work than in the more strongly gendered identity quests of the two female authors. In this context, whereas Duras makes ground-breaking use of pronoun switching to question the nature of autobiography, Darrieussecq's innovative use of narrative pronouns is equally radical in her exploration of female identity in the family.

## Tense mixing

The changes in focus introduced into my chosen authors' novels by means of pronoun switching are mirrored in each writer's frequent recourse to tense mixing. As mentioned in the Introduction, French is distinguished by its unusual narrative tense system, in which two past tenses, the perfect and the preterite, coexist in the written language. Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq all make innovative use of the possibilities created by this situation, juxtaposing the *passé simple* and the *passé composé* as they move between objectivity and subjectivity. They also shift constantly between past and present tenses as they travel backwards and forwards in time. Clearly, in the context of the shifting nature of the postmodern identity quest, the traditional but artificial distinction between the *système du récit* and the *système du discours* is no longer maintained, while the writers' continuous reassessment of selfhood makes the *système du présent narratif*, as defined by Anne Judge, an attractive option. On occasions, all of these alternatives are combined in Judge's most

recently identified system, the *système multifocal*, where the lack of any fixed point of reference reflects the fragmentation of a unified concept of the self. All three writers thus exploit the fluidity and flexibility of the French tense system, moving frequently between the different choices open to them as they seek to convey the instability of identity. As this system is still undergoing considerable change, I shall now summarise recent developments in French narrative tense usage before discussing at length my chosen authors' adventurous use of tense mixing.

In order to appreciate the sophisticated interplay between *passé simple* and *passé composé* present in the novels of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq, it is necessary to emphasise that the relationship between the two main past tenses, the perfect and the preterite, is far from static. Whereas Benveniste, writing forty years ago, could state that 'comme temps du récit historique, l'aoriste se maintient fort bien',<sup>15</sup> by the 1980s the picture had changed considerably: Linda Waugh, writing at this time, asserts that 'it is uncontroversial (sic) that *PC* has taken over many of *PS*'s functions in many contexts',<sup>16</sup> while Edward Van Vliet goes even further, describing the role of the *passé simple* as reduced to 'an optional choice for the writer in order to give a certain detachment from the narrative'<sup>17</sup> and referring to the preterite as a 'moribund visual' tense in opposition to the 'acoustic' perfect.<sup>18</sup> As the *passé simple* has become rarer, the *passé composé* has gained ground, moving in to fill the gap left by the decline of the preterite, so that Waugh describes it as a 'semantic hybrid', a tense in transition which combines a perfective and a past punctual role.<sup>19</sup> Whereas in speech the *passé composé*, which was originally a present perfective, has additionally acquired the past punctual role left unfilled by the disappearance of the *passé simple*, in writing, where distance can still be expressed by the preterite, the perfect is usually associated with some degree of present relevance. Waugh postulates a continuum to link these different functions, suggesting that while in the absence of the *passé simple* in a narrative the *passé composé* may take on the role of a past punctual, it acquires more present relevance when, on the other hand, the preterite is 'syntagmatically salient'.<sup>20</sup> Waugh, then, sees the written perfect tense as having a role which is intermediate between the remoteness of the *passé simple* and the immediacy of the present. This flexibility is clearly attractive to authors such as Duras, Modiano and

<sup>15</sup> *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, p. 243.

<sup>16</sup> Linda Waugh, 'Marking Time with the *passé composé*: Towards a Theory of the Perfect', *Linguisticae Investigationes* 11, 1, (1987), 1-47, p. 31.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Van Vliet, 'The Disappearance of the French *passé simple*: A Morphological and Sociological Study', *Word* 34, 2, (1983), 89-113, p. 90.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>19</sup> 'Marking Time with the *passé composé*', p. 35.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.



Darrieussecq, who make extensive use of the *passé composé* as they move between past and present in the context of the identity quest.

It is also noteworthy that an increase in the narrative use of two tenses favoured by my selected writers, the present and the imperfect, has been noted by linguistics specialists. Ayres-Bennett and Carruthers, tracing the rise of the narrative present, point out that this tense, as used by the *nouveaux romanciers*, may retain a timeless, objective quality, or may, on the other hand, represent the subjective consciousness of the narrator.<sup>21</sup> Anna Jaubert inclines towards the latter position, qualifying the present as 'un poste d'observation pour le narrateur' and describing its effects in a first-person narrative as follows: 'Les faits sont livrés comme vécus en direct; *mais l'actualité est alors solidaire du sujet fictionnel, et ne peut se soutenir sans lui*'.<sup>22</sup> Anne Judge, who, as previously noted, has contributed significantly to the debate surrounding the prevalence of the narrative present, describes the systematic use of this tense as 'un phénomène devenu récemment très fréquent', in which elements of both a vivid 'présent fictif' and a more neutral 'temps « passe-partout »' may coexist.<sup>23</sup> As we shall see, Duras relies heavily on both of these uses of the *présent narratif* in her later fiction. The narrative imperfect, which has also become more widespread, appears to be acquiring an increasingly subjective dimension. Ayres-Bennett and Carruthers describe it as 'expanding the event, lending it breadth and depth',<sup>24</sup> while Pierre Le Goffic stresses its dreamlike quality, in which boundaries are dissolved, emphasising the fact that it does not represent the passage of time in the same way as the perfect and the preterite.<sup>25</sup> For Marie Labelle, it is used to describe a situation from the inside, so that it becomes 'un outil d'évaluation interne' which can be used to break the sequence of a narrative.<sup>26</sup> Jaubert takes this notion further, seeing the tense as providing a bridge between different narrative systems: 'l'imparfait assure une *transition* dans l'énonciation alternative', linking the *système du récit* and the *système du discours*.<sup>27</sup>

How are the above developments reflected in the narrative tense usage of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq? All three writers exemplify the trend identified by Van Vliet, giving preference to the narrative present and the perfect over the preterite, which is frequently confined to very specific uses, and thus betraying a rejection of remoteness and

<sup>21</sup> *Problems and Perspectives*, p. 178.

<sup>22</sup> Anna Jaubert, 'Le Déploiement littéraire du temps verbal' in Carl Vetters (ed.), *Le Temps, de la phrase au texte* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1993), pp. 193-205, p. 203 (author's italics).

<sup>23</sup> 'Écarts entre manuels et réalités', p. 138.

<sup>24</sup> *Problems and Perspectives*, p. 183.

<sup>25</sup> Pierre Le Goffic, 'Que l'imparfait n'est pas un temps du passé' in Pierre Le Goffic (ed.), *points de vue sur l'imparfait* (Caen: Centre de Publications de l'Université de Caen, 1986), pp. 55-69.

<sup>26</sup> Marie Labelle, 'L'Utilisation des temps du passé dans les narrations françaises: Le passé composé, l'imparfait et le présent historique', *Revue Romane* 22, 1, (1987), 3-29, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> 'Le Déploiement littéraire du temps verbal', p. 201.

objectivity in favour of greater subjective involvement in the narrative. Whereas, as we shall see, there are considerable differences in the three authors' use of narrative tenses, each of them combines the *système du récit*, the *système du discours* and the *système du présent narratif* in varying proportions to effect subtle changes of focus which reflect the constantly shifting perspectives of the identity quest. The narrative imperfect is used both to highlight the subjectivity of this search and to move seamlessly between different narrative alternatives. The writers' use of narrative tenses generally involves a combination of either *passé composé* and *passé simple*, or present and *passé composé*, although, as we shall see, other combinations are possible. Sometimes both temporal systems coexist throughout a text while, in other instances, one tense pattern supplants the other. More rarely, true multifocality, as defined by Judge, is present, in which no stable pivotal tense prevails for any length of time. As Judge has pointed out, it is difficult at times to distinguish between a system based on the narrative present but making significant use of other tenses and the *système multifocal*: 'Il faut noter qu'il peut être difficile quelquefois de démêler SMF et un PrN 'riche', un PrN riche étant un PrN employant tous les temps (ou presque) pour donner différents niveaux de profondeur'.<sup>28</sup> She concludes, however, that the *système multifocal* entails a multiplicity of points of view, whereas, in the *système du présent narratif*, a single viewpoint is dominant. As this definition does not cover dual perspectives, I shall restrict my use of the term 'multifocality' to refer to those novels where more than two tense systems are combined, preferring 'tense mixing' where only two temporal patterns are involved. I shall now consider in turn each writer's use of narrative tenses, identifying different patterns of tense usage and commenting on their significance in the context of the identity quest.

Of the three authors, Duras exhibits the most startling progression in narrative tense usage, moving from initial adherence to the conventional *système du récit* to almost complete abandonment of the *passé simple*.<sup>29</sup> In terms of the tense systems referred to above, her work can be divided into three sections: the early novels, in which the *temps du récit* or, in one instance, the *temps du discours* is quite closely adhered to, the novels of her middle period, together with a few later works, which are characterised by tense mixing and the gradual disappearance of the *passé simple*, and the bulk of her later output, in which the narrative present predominates. A snapshot of this developing use of narrative tenses can be obtained from scrutiny of Duras's three reworkings of her adolescence: tense usage in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* is entirely conventional, frequent movement

<sup>28</sup> 'Écarts entre manuels et réalités', p. 140.

<sup>29</sup> Of Duras's late novels, only *La Pluie d'été* contains a few residual preterites (pp. 149-51).

between *passé composé* and narrative present characterises *L'Amant*,<sup>30</sup> and the present tense prevails in *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. There is a close correlation between the author's changing use of narrative tenses and the developments in narrative structure identified in the previous chapter. Thus traditional tense usage goes hand in hand with the linear narrative of the early novels, tense mixing reflects the increasing circularity of the middle period and the predominance of the narrative present in the later novels reflects the return to a form of narration heavily influenced by the cinema.

Whereas a number of critics have commented in passing on Duras's use of narrative tenses, no detailed longitudinal study has, to the best of my knowledge, been made of the subject. The majority of critics have briefly turned their attention to the writer's increasing reliance on the present tense, described by Anderson as having a cinematographic effect<sup>31</sup> and by Selous as focusing on immediacy.<sup>32</sup> As far as tense mixing is concerned, both Skutta, discussing *Moderato cantabile*,<sup>33</sup> and Hill, writing about *L'Amant*,<sup>34</sup> mention the changes in perspective introduced into the narrative by this practice. I now wish to consider Duras's developing use of tenses in further detail, relating it to the overarching theme of the identity quest.

Duras's use of narrative tenses in her early fiction need not detain us long, as, in four of her first five novels, it is almost entirely conventional. Minor deviations, however, such as the instance in *Un barrage contre le Pacifique* identified in the previous section, in which a change of pronoun is accompanied by a move to the present tense, betray faultlines in a system which would later be abandoned. In the remaining work, *La Vie tranquille*, whose status as a precursor of future developments in Duras's fiction has already been identified, the *temps du récit* is replaced by the *temps du discours* as the *passé composé* supplants the preterite in accordance with the subjectivity of the first-person narrative. A further development occurs at the central point in the story, when the present tense intervenes, interrupting the onward flow of events. Duras uses tense mixing in conjunction with pronoun switching at this juncture in the novel to highlight the significant moment of self-awareness, symbolised by the narrator's viewing of herself in the mirror, around which the narrative revolves. Thus, at an early stage in her writing career, Duras can already be seen to be using these linguistic devices in the context of the identity quest, a trend which would become much more marked in her middle period, to which I shall now turn.

<sup>30</sup> Although chronologically *L'Amant* was written quite late in Duras's career, stylistically it can be considered to belong to her middle period, as discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>31</sup> *Le Discours féminin de Marguerite Duras*, p. 128.

<sup>32</sup> 'Marguerite and the Mountain', p. 87.

<sup>33</sup> *Aspects de la narration*, p. 52.

<sup>34</sup> *Marguerite Duras*, p. 118.

The innovation displayed in *La Vie tranquille* reasserts itself in *Moderato cantabile*, published fourteen years later. In this novel, whose adventurousness has led to its widespread recognition as an example of the *nouveau roman*,<sup>35</sup> Duras introduces multifocality. *Moderato cantabile* can thus be considered to usher in a new phase in her movement towards an alternative tense system, more in tune with the identity quest than the *temps du récit*. This period of linguistic experimentation, involving an expansion of the *présent narratif* together with a progressive restriction of the *passé simple*, parallels the movement from linearity to circularity outlined in the previous chapter. Some of Duras's most original writing occurs in this middle period, in which she makes ground-breaking use of narrative tenses before rejecting the *passé simple* in favour of the narrative present. I shall therefore consider her developing use of narrative tenses in this transitional phase in some detail, with particular reference to *Moderato cantabile*, *L'Après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas* and *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*.

Although multifocality occurs in only one of the eight chapters into which *Moderato cantabile* is divided, its introduction is sufficient to destabilise Duras's hitherto largely traditional use of narrative tenses: after this point in her literary career, the author's reliance on the *passé simple* declines rapidly, as she replaces the *système du récit* by other narrative patterns. A close examination of tense usage in Chapter VII of this short novel will reveal a shift in Duras's writing towards a radically new system in which the present tense becomes increasingly important, contesting the *passé simple* as the most appropriate vehicle for the narrative. This break with convention occurs at a significant moment in the novel, when Anne Desbaresdes distances herself from her bourgeois past and realigns herself with the very different world represented by Chauvin. Duras's innovative use of tenses in this chapter is thus intimately bound up with the identity quest, as the author at once introduces the narrative present to highlight the importance of this episode and makes contrasting use of the *passé simple* and the *passé composé* to symbolise the dichotomy between the two social *milieux* frequented by the central protagonist.

The chapter opens in the present tense, which is used to describe in detail the main events of the dinner party at which Anne's late arrival and bizarre behaviour causes consternation among the guests: 'Sur un plat d'argent à l'achat duquel trois générations ont contribué, le saumon arrive, glacé dans sa forme native' (p. 99). What is the effect of the sudden switch to the narrative present after the *passé simple* of the preceding chapters?

<sup>35</sup> Claude Mauriac, in an article entitled 'L'Étouffant Univers de Marguerite Duras', which appeared in *Le Figaro* on 12 March 1958, shortly after the novel's publication, considers it as establishing her as a *nouveau romancier*: 'Marguerite Duras a pu être officiellement enrôlée dans l'équipe des pionniers qui tentent d'ouvrir au roman ses voies nouvelles'.

Above all, it introduces a sense of involvement, as the reader is no longer remote from the narrative but intimately bound up with it. Duras's use of the present here thus has overtones of the *présent dramatique*, defined by Judge as being used in fiction to throw into relief an important episode in the story.<sup>36</sup> It can therefore be regarded as an interesting example of a present which is at once narrative and dramatic, imparting to the scene a distinctly cinematographic character, in which the reader, like Chauvin, observes the unfolding drama from outside, distanced from it spatially but not temporally. This link between outside and inside is reinforced by the symbolism of the magnolia, the flower of death, the odour of whose 'floraison funèbre' (p. 99) pervades both the house and the park which surrounds it. The magnolia not only foreshadows the fate of Anne and Chauvin but is used very skilfully by Duras to provide the timespan for the main events of the evening, whose duration can be measured by the wilting of the blossom which Anne wears between her breasts: 'Le magnolia entre ses seins se fane tout à fait. Il a parcouru l'été en une heure de temps' (p. 111). This period of an hour becomes the focus of the narrative, around which past and future events are perceived to revolve, so that circularity displaces linearity. Duras achieves this effect by means of quite frequent innovative use of both past and future tenses in this chapter, in order to highlight the significance of the present moment, as in the following example, in which the outward success of the social event which is such an ordeal for Anne is conveyed: 'La soirée réussira. Les femmes sont au plus sûr de leur éclat. Les hommes les couvriront de bijoux au prorata de leurs bilans' (p. 103). Both the ritual nature of the dinner and Anne's alienation from this bourgeois environment are emphasised by the slowed-down narrative, in which the progress of the meal is mirrored by the tense usage: 'Le canard suit son cours' (p. 108), 'Le canard à l'orange, de nouveau, repassera', 'Quelques-uns ont repris du canard à l'orange' (p. 110). At the end of the chapter, the use of future tenses alone for the guests' departure and Anne's visit to her son's bedroom highlights the dinner party itself rather than its aftermath as the central point of the action.

Duras's use of past tenses in this chapter is highly significant. While shifting the main focus of the narrative to the present, she retains both *passé simple* and *passé composé* without, however, observing the traditional distinction between these tenses when used in conjunction with each other. Instead of using the *passé simple* for remote events and the *passé composé* for more recent happenings, she rejects this temporal distinction between past punctual and present perfect in favour of an emotional distance between the tenses.

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<sup>36</sup> See her unpublished work: *Language and Style year 3: l'emploi des temps et des modes dans la langue écrite* (Cours de troisième année, donné par Anne Judge en collaboration avec Bénédicte Facques, University of Surrey 2001-2), p. 17.

Thus the *passé composé* occurs in passages relating to Chauvin, suggesting Anne's closeness to him and their probable future together: 'Cet homme a quitté le boulevard de la Mer, il a fait le tour du parc, l'a regardé des dunes qui, au nord, le bordent, puis il est revenu, il a redescendu le talus, il est redescendu jusqu'à la grève' (p. 105). Whereas this use of the perfect tense is, of itself, unremarkable, it contrasts markedly with the author's use of the preterite for events connected with Anne Desbaresdes' social background, however recent, as demonstrated by the description of her late arrival at the dinner party: 'Ils sont quinze, ceux qui l'attendirent tout à l'heure dans le grand salon du rez-de-chaussée. Elle entra dans cet univers étincelant, se dirigea vers le grand piano, s'y accouda, ne s'excusa nullement. On le fit à sa place' (p. 101). This unusual use of the *passé simple* for the recent past, which recurs throughout the chapter, has a distancing effect, reinforcing Anne's estrangement from an environment in which she feels increasingly uncomfortable and which she is about to leave forever. Thus her tense usage in this chapter is truly multifocal, reflecting three contrasting perspectives on the same event: that of Anne, that of Chauvin and that of the Desbaresdes' bourgeois social circle.

In Chapter VII of *Moderato cantabile*, then, Duras makes innovative and effective use of narrative tenses, introducing the narrative present, framed by past and future tenses, to single out a defining moment in Anne Desbaresdes' search for self and using contrasting past tenses to represent the different worlds between which she is caught. The consequences of this bold experimentation with narrative tenses are evident in her subsequent novels, in which the *passé simple*, having been contested as the tense of choice in *Moderato cantabile*, gradually loses its importance. It is almost entirely absent from her subsequent work, *Dix heures et demie du soir en été*, in which, for the first time in her oeuvre, third-person narration is coupled with the use of the narrative present.<sup>37</sup> The present tense gives a sense of immediacy and urgency to this tale of a rejected wife's unsuccessful attempt to save a murderer pursued by the police and prefigures Duras's espousal of a system based on the narrative present in her later writing. Before rejecting the *passé simple* as unsuited to the subjective identity quest, however, Duras has recourse to it in her next two novels, to which I shall now turn.

In both *L'Après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas* and *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*, tense mixing occurs throughout the text, rather than being confined to a single chapter, demonstrating Duras's progressive liberation from the confines of a tense system which no longer met her needs. How does her altered reliance on the *passé simple* in these two

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<sup>37</sup> Only two examples of the *passé simple*, both involving the use of *être*, occur in the novel, on p.49 and p. 53.

novels illuminate her developing search for self? I shall argue that, in the earlier of the two novels, the author uses tense mixing constructively as a means of switching from objectivity to subjectivity (as in *L'Amant*, though with a different combination of tenses). In the later novel, however, the use of the *passé simple* in conjunction with the linear narrative is revealed to be fatally flawed in the context of the search for self, so that its rejection becomes imperative.

Although the *passé simple* remains the dominant tense in *L'Après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas*, present at the beginning and end of the narrative, its use is contested on almost every page of the novel by irruptions of the narrative present, as the following example will demonstrate:

L'attente de M. Andesmas recommença. Contradictoirement elle fut d'abord plus calme, moins impatientée qu'un moment avant. Il regarde le gouffre de lumière. La mer à cette altitude est presque du même bleu, remarque-t-il, que le ciel. Il se lève pour se degourdir les jambes et mieux voir la mer (p. 34).

These frequent changes in tense have a significant effect on the narrative, presenting the old man now objectively, now subjectively. They also disrupt the temporal flow of the novel, as the onward movement suggested by the *passé simple* is suspended by the present. Although the transitions between these tenses are usually abrupt, as in the example quoted above, Duras occasionally makes subtle use of verbs which have the same form in both tenses, notably *dire*, to effect a hiatus between past and present, as in this instance, which occurs during M. Andesmas' encounter with Michel Arc's mentally retarded daughter:

L'enfant se mit à rire:

– Votre fauteuil, il va se casser, dit-elle.

Elle se relève et il reconnaît une enfant déjà vue (p. 46).<sup>38</sup>

Duras also makes slight but effective use of the imperfect and perfect tenses in this novel, using the imperfect to draw out the moment, giving it a dreamlike quality, as in the description by Michel Arc's wife of Valérie Andesmas's progression through the village square, in which the choice of the imperfect tense in the first sentence is thrown into relief by the unusual combination of an adverb of duration with the perfect tense in the second sentence: 'Elle passait, la place est grande, elle passait, la traversait, la traversait. Interminablement elle est passée votre enfant, monsieur Andesmas' (p. 87). Duras's skilful

<sup>38</sup> For other examples of this technique, see pp. 49, 71, 81, 83, 91.

handling of narrative tenses in this novel results in a considerably more nuanced depiction of Monsieur Andesmas's situation than would have been possible by strict adherence to the *temps du récit*. By juxtaposing two different tense systems, she conveys the old man's changing perception of time as, alienated from a world from which he is increasingly cut off, he slips in and out of reverie.

Tense usage in *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* is considerably more complex than in its predecessor, being bound up with the contestation of the linear narrative discussed in the previous chapter. In contrast to *L'Après-midi de Monsieur Andesmas*, this novel opens in the *passé composé*: 'Lol V. Stein est née ici, à S. Tahla, et elle y a vécu une grande partie de sa jeunesse' (p. 11), a tense which also occurs at the book's conclusion:

Le soir tombait lorsque je suis arrivé à l'Hôtel des Bois.  
Lol nous avait précédés. Elle dormait dans le champ de seigle, fatiguée,  
fatiguée par notre voyage (p. 191).

This use of the *passé composé* is unsurprising, being in keeping with the first-person narrative of the novel. Tense switching, however, takes place early in the story, when the *passé composé* is replaced by the *passé simple* which then prevails for more than one third of the narrative. The reason for this change in dominant tense initially appears to be clearcut: when the first-person narrator tells Lol's story through the eyes of another person, the perfect gives way to the preterite. Thus the description of the ball, purportedly described by Tatiana Karl, and the following section, in which Lol's mother recounts her daughter's early life, use the *temps du récit*, thus imparting an objective quality to the narration of Lol's past. Additionally, the frequent use of the pluperfect tense alongside the *passé simple* in the ball scene has the effect of insisting on the event's remoteness, conferring on it the status of an *Un*narrative or founding myth, a quality which is preserved in the fairytale-like language of the following section: 'Jean Bedford la demanda en mariage sans l'avoir revue' (p. 30).

The certainty implied by this quite conventional use of narrative tenses in the early part of the novel is, however, completely destroyed by the narrative *coup* in which the first-person narrator is revealed to be none other than Jacques Hold, a character already referred to in the third person in the seemingly impartial narration of the previous section.<sup>39</sup> This startling disclosure casts doubt on the veracity of the preceding events, which can no longer be taken at face value, given that they may well have been invented by the unreliable narrator. This undermining of the objectivity of the narrative is reflected by a change to the

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<sup>39</sup> See p. 75 of the novel.



present and perfect tenses, together with a return to the first person. From this point onwards, the *passé simple* becomes increasingly rare, although Borgomano's assertion that it disappears is not strictly true.<sup>40</sup> In a short section towards the end of the novel, Duras reverts to tense mixing to vary the focus on Jacques Hold, who, as he makes love to Tatiana Karl while being observed by Lol, is described alternately in the third person, using the *passé simple*, and in the first-person, using the *passé composé* (pp. 122-6). After this moment, however, the preterite is superseded by the narrative present and the perfect tense, tenses which will predominate in the remainder of Duras's fiction. *Le Ravisement de Lol V. Stein*, then, can be construed as a novel in which Duras, having exposed the misleading nature of the objective narrative in the context of the subjective search for self, finally repudiates it. This reading is borne out by the fact that she makes no further significant use of the *passé simple* in her narratives.

*Le Vice-consul*, published two years after *Le Ravisement de Lol V. Stein*, marks Duras's definitive adoption of the system centred on the narrative present with which she had experimented in *Dix heures et demie du soir en été*. In *Le Vice-consul*, as in the earlier novel, the extensive use of the present tense gives immediacy to the narrative, which is also based round the theme of flight. The narrative present, however, has the additional function in *Le Vice-consul* of conveying intemporality: its use in the context of the beggar girl emphasises both the tenuous nature of her apprehension of time and the gradual erosion of her sense of identity. As Cousseau observes, the use of the present tense in the description of her flight from selfhood 'aplatit tout repère temporel'.<sup>41</sup> This atemporal use of the present is further developed in a number of other works by Duras, written both before and after the period when she forsook the novel for the cinema, notably *Détruire, dit-elle*, *L'Amour*, *L'Homme assis dans le couloir*, *La Maladie de la mort* and *Les Yeux bleus cheveux noirs*. These novels are connected in that they all explore male-female relations in a liminal setting in which time is no longer apprehended in conventional terms. Alongside this innovative use of the timeless present, Duras retains a more conventional use of the narrative present to convey immediacy in works such as *L'Amant*, *Emily L.*, *La Pluie d'été* and *Yann Andrea Steiner*, where an element of storytelling is in evidence. The final stage of the author's writing career is thus characterised by two parallel but somewhat different uses of the present tense.

Tense mixing is less prevalent in Duras's later novels, from which the *passé simple* has all but disappeared, than in those of her middle period. There is, however, a marked

<sup>40</sup> Marguerite Duras, p. 50.

<sup>41</sup> *Poétique de l'enfance*, p. 283.

difference in its incidence between the two groups of novels identified above. In the works related in the atemporal present, the intrusion of other tenses is limited and does not alter the focus of the narrative. The few instances of past and future reference in *L'Amour*, for example are all to be found in direct speech rather than the narrative itself: ' – Ils vont vous tuer', (p. 96), '- Mort, il est mort' (p. 105). In *L'Homme assis dans le couloir*, regular interruptions in the past conditional, such as 'elle n'aurait rien dit, elle n'aurait rien regardé' (p. 9), underline the hypothetical nature of the text rather than shifting the focus on the participants. In the second group of novels, tense usage is more varied. In *Yann Andrea Steiner*, past and future tenses are used freely to frame the mainly present-tense narrative: 'Les enfants ont remonté la colline pour aller au réfectoire', 'Un jour l'été finira' (p. 47). In only two of these novels, though, is tense mixing used consistently in order to effect changes in perspective on the protagonists. In *La Pluie d'été*, Duras moves freely between the *temps du discours* and the narrative present to depict the life of a marginalised family living in a Parisian suburb. This tense usage echoes that of *L'Amant*, written six years earlier, which constitutes Duras's most striking example of tense mixing in her later writing. *L'Amant* has marked affinities with the works of the author's middle period in that it represents an autobiographical reworking of the material explored imaginatively at that time. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the tense mixing used in the context of the search for self which dominates these novels should be perpetuated in this novel. Obviously, however, having rejected the *passé simple* as inappropriate to the subjective narrative, Duras does not return to it here. Instead, she combines the *système du discours* and the narrative present in order to present her subject from a dual temporal perspective. Judge has commented on the effectiveness of the mixture of two tense systems in this novel: 'Dans ce cas, l'emploi côte à côte du système du discours et du système du présent narratif permet de voguer entre deux eaux, en brouillant les frontières entre l'histoire racontée au passé composé et l'histoire revécue au présent'.<sup>42</sup> If Duras's use of pronoun switching in this novel is also taken into account, it can be seen that the author allows her adolescent protagonist to be viewed from four main angles: *je* plus narrative present, *je* plus *passé composé*, *elle* plus narrative present and *elle* plus *passé composé*. Thus the teenage girl is depicted from the point of view of the present and the past as well as both subjectively and objectively, as the following examples will demonstrate:

1. Je descends du car. Je vais au bastingage. Je regarde le fleuve (p. 17).

<sup>42</sup> 'Choix entre le présent narratif et le système multifocal', p. 220.

2. Elle entre dans l'auto noire. La portière se referme (p. 44).
3. Il a allumé une cigarette et il me l'a donnée. Et tout bas contre ma bouche il m'a parlé (p. 55).
4. C'est arrivé très vite ce jour-là, un jeudi. Il est venu tous les jours la chercher au lycée pour la ramener à la pension (p. 46).

Duras, then, while curtailing her use of tense mixing in her later novels, does not renounce it completely, retaining dual use of the *temps du discours* and the narrative present in two of her later novels. In general, however, her fiction displays a marked progression, in which the distance and objectivity of the *temps du récit* is gradually supplanted by the immediacy and subjectivity of the narrative present, reflecting the changing nature of her identity quest. To my mind, her most interesting and innovative use of tenses can be found in the major works of her middle period, to which *La Vie tranquille* can be considered as a prelude and *L'Amant* as a coda. Duras's radical questioning of the nature of the self in these novels is mirrored by her adventurous use of tense mixing during this phase of her temporal development. The logical outcome of this experimentation is a renunciation of the *temps du récit* of her early writing in favour of a system based on the present tense which she uses both to convey immediacy and intemporality. Whereas this outcome follows naturally from her exploration of the self, Duras's almost complete rejection of the *passé simple* in her later writing deprives her of one of the narrative choices open to French authors. As we shall see, neither Modiano nor Darrieussecq goes as far as Duras in this direction.

Modiano's use of narrative tenses differs from that of Duras in two main respects. Firstly, because of the essentially retrospective nature of his identity quest, he includes a mixture of past and present tenses in all his novels instead of progressing, as Duras does, towards a system centred on the narrative present. Secondly, unlike Duras, he contests the objectivity of the *temps du récit* from the outset, introducing tense mixing between the *passé composé* and *passé simple* into his first novel, *La Place de l'étoile*, and making use of it in the majority of his subsequent works. This threefold mixture of tenses systems which characterises his fiction allows much of it to be considered as multifocal. Modiano's use of tenses is complex and varied, reflecting the many temporal layers between which his narrator shuttles in his search for self. Most of his novels contain a rich mixture of past tenses as well as some future and conditional forms, mirroring the narrator's journey backwards and forwards in time. In his selection of narrative tenses, Modiano does not, however, abide by convention, preferring to follow the internal logic of the narrative. Thus his use of the perfect and preterite is highly original, corresponding to no set pattern: while making no sustained conventional use of the *temps du récit*, he includes a variable number

of preterites in all but a small minority of his novels. This tense mixing between *passé simple* and *passé composé* can therefore be considered to be a long-term strategy on Modiano's part, rather than constituting a transitional phase, as in the case of Duras. His use of the preterite does, however, decrease significantly in his most recent novels. In examining Modiano's use of narrative tenses, I shall pay particular attention to this distinctive use of tense mixing, relating its frequency to developments in the author's identity quest.

As with Duras, critical commentary on Modiano's use of narrative tenses is not very extensive and no comprehensive overview of his tense usage has yet been provided. In addition, whereas some observations on this subject by literary critics are most apt, others are misleading. In the former category, Morris identifies the author's interchangeable use of past tenses in *La Ronde de nuit* as introducing 'temporal uncertainty, rather than rigid chronology',<sup>43</sup> while Roux considers that Modiano's use of tense mixing in *La Place de l'étoile* neutralises the opposition between past and present in favour of 'une durée nulle',<sup>44</sup> and that the narrative present creates an impression of 'omnitemporalité'.<sup>45</sup> Less helpfully, Laurent insists that in spite of the predominance of the *passé composé* in *Remise de peine*, 'le passé simple est très fréquent dans tous les autres romans de Modiano',<sup>46</sup> a comment which, as we shall see, is inaccurate.

The only critic to devote more than passing attention to Modiano's complex use of narrative tenses is Kawakami, who devotes several pages to the subject, providing some perceptive insights. For her, Modiano's non-standard use of tenses springs from the importance in his writing of the order of narration,<sup>47</sup> so that 'the different tenses used to describe a past event can be seen as expressions of the narrator's *attitude* towards the event, a function of the narrator's subjective experience of time, rather than as indices of temporality'.<sup>48</sup> Thus tense serves to highlight the emotional distance between the narrator and the events of the story rather than having a chronological function, time references being provided deictically through Modiano's frequent use of dates. Kawakami uses *Voyage de nocces*, one of Modiano's more complicated temporal narratives, to illustrate this point, concluding that that author's use of narrative tenses is subversive, causing the different time levels to 'begin to merge into one another, being on the same plane of the *narratorial consciousness*; chronology becomes redundant as the tenses subvert the order

<sup>43</sup> Patrick Modiano (1996), p. 26.

<sup>44</sup> *Figures de l'Occupation*, pp. 159-60.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>46</sup> *L'Oeuvre de Patrick Modiano*, p. 40.

<sup>47</sup> Kawakami's notion of the order of narration is discussed in the previous chapter.

<sup>48</sup> *A Self-conscious Art*, p. 33 (author's italics).

of *histoire* which the dates are there to impose'.<sup>49</sup> Only when Modiano returns to the narrator's present does his tense usage, involving narrative present, *passé composé* and future, conform to convention. Narrative present is, however, also used for retrospection, so that the frontiers between past and present are abolished as dramatic tension is imparted to a distant event. Thus, for Modiano, a narrative such as that of *Voyage de nocces* 'is not the objective record of a series of events whose nature and order would appear the same to any observer, but an emotional and sympathetic re-creation'.<sup>50</sup>

While Kawakami's analysis of Modiano's use of narrative tenses is persuasive, shedding considerable light on the writer's unorthodox use of tenses in his novels, it is far from exhaustive. By restricting herself to detailed examination of only one work, a later novel which contains significantly less tense mixing than the majority of Modiano's early fiction, she fails to address the wide range of narrative tense usage which exists in the author's writing. A progression can be discerned in Modiano's *oeuvre* from very frequent use of tense mixing involving the *passé simple* to occasional use of the *passé simple*, and, at times, complete abandonment of this tense in favour of the *passé composé* and narrative present. The writer's diminishing reliance on the preterite, though not completely linear, appears to me to be closely connected with the changing nature of his search for self. I therefore wish to consider Modiano's developing use of narrative tenses throughout his writing, exploring the relationship between tense mixing and the dynamics of the identity quest.

In spite of considerable variation from novel to novel, three overall patterns emerge from a detailed analysis of Modiano's narrative tense usage: narratives which rely heavily on the *passé simple*, narratives in which the *passé simple* is reserved for a few short episodes and narratives in which the *passé simple* occurs only once or not at all. Of the author's twenty-one novels, seven fall into the first category, eight into the second and six into the third. Whereas there is a general trend towards a gradual reduction in the frequency of the preterite, some overlap between these different patterns of tense usage occurs: two early novels, *La Ronde de nuit* and *Villa triste*, contain fewer preterites than the other fiction of this period, while, in the author's later work, novels containing occasional use of the *passé simple* coexist with those from which this tense has virtually disappeared. The overall picture, however, is clear: the florid tense mixing which characterises *La Place de l'étoile* and subsists throughout the first part of Modiano's writing gradually declines, disappearing in his later fiction.

<sup>49</sup> *A Self-conscious Art*, p. 34 (author's italics).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

As suggested above, this significant change in narrative tense usage on the writer's part seems to me to be intimately bound up with developments in the nature of the identity quest. In order to demonstrate the link between Modiano's use of *passé composé/passé simple* tense mixing and the search for self, I shall subdivide his output into four distinct phases before considering narrative tense usage in one or more works from each group. In the initial phase, comprising his first six novels, tense mixing is prevalent. There then follows a transitional phase, ushered in by *Une jeunesse*, in which the author's use of the *passé simple* alters significantly. The third phase, inaugurated by *Vestiaire de l'enfance*, is characterised by alternation between novels with residual *passé composé/passé simple* tense mixing and those from which the *passé simple* is absent. Finally, *Dora Bruder* marks a further transition, after which the preterite all but disappears from Modiano's writing. I shall now examine narrative tense usage in each of these phases.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Modiano's initial project involved a return to the period of the Occupation to search for the sense of selfhood denied him by his father. Thus his early work, especially his first trilogy, is deeply rooted in the past, as well as being infused with an atmosphere of uncertainty and doubt as to his origins. The author's inclusion of a wide range of tenses in these narratives can therefore be seen to have two functions. Firstly, the juxtaposition of tenses such as pluperfect, preterite, narrative imperfect, perfect, present and future creates an impression of many different time layers. Secondly, and more importantly, frequent switching between the main narrative tenses introduces rapid changes of focus into the text. Above all, the use of the *passé simple* to indicate emotional rather than temporal distance conveys an impression of bewilderment and estrangement on the part of the narrator, who frequently loses his bearings while trying to make sense of a past which alternately attracts and repels him. These constant shifts of perspective underline the fragility of the selfhood of Modiano's ghostlike narrators, as they travel ceaselessly between past and present in search of an identity which eludes them.

Nowhere is the vulnerability of a character in search of an identity more forcefully depicted than in *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*, Modiano's sixth novel. This key text, published ten years after the author's literary debut, earned him the Prix Goncourt and can be seen to epitomise the search for self of the early novels. Structural anarchy, chronological uncertainty and apparently chaotic use of narrative tenses coexist in this work in which the notion that a meaningful sense of self can be recreated from a past from which the narrator is emotionally separated is refuted. The symbolism encapsulated in the title, which refers to a previous address from the narrator's inaccessible past, is perpetuated throughout the novel, which recounts an amnesiac's search for his lost identity. Clearly,

this endeavour is fraught with difficulty, as, when presented with objective evidence as to who he might be, the narrator's loss of memory prevents a subjective response, so that he is incapable of assuming any of the putative identities suggested by his research: 'Et je ne me souviens plus si, ce soir-là, je m'appelais Jimmy ou Pedro, Stern ou McEvoy' (p. 182). Eventually a partial return of his memory enables him to recall a painful episode involving a flight in a snowstorm from Vichy across the border into Switzerland, which precipitated his amnesia: 'Tout autour de moi, il n'y avait plus que du blanc' (p. 231). At this point, the significance of the repression of traumatic memory becomes evident, especially in the light of Modiano's widespread use of Switzerland as a symbol of denial. The narrator's inability to come to terms with the past, revealed as the cause of his loss of identity, stands in the way of his search for self. Thus his quest remains unresolved, as the identity which he assumes at the end of the novel is cast into doubt, given the impossibility of acquiring any meaningful sense of self in such circumstances.

How does Modiano's use of tense mixing in this novel mirror the identity crisis at its heart? In keeping with the narrator's emotional disarray, the book is divided into a large number of chapters of varying lengths, many of which contain tense mixing. An example from Chapter III will demonstrate the author's unorthodox but effective use of a range of narrative tenses to convey the changing emotions of the amnesiac subject in search of an identity. The action of this chapter opens in the *passé composé* as Guy Roland goes to wait outside a church where a funeral is taking place in order to meet a man whom he is supposed to have known before the onset of his amnesia:

Il était six heures moins le quart. J'ai proposé au chauffeur du taxi de m'attendre dans la petite rue Charles-Marie-Widor et j'ai suivi celle-ci à pied jusqu'à la rue Claude-Lorrain où se trouvait l'église russe (p. 30).

A section in the narrative imperfect follows, demonstrating Modiano's predilection for this tense as a bridge between the subjective *passé composé* and the more objective *passé simple*, followed by a change to the preterite, which has a distancing effect, emphasising the gulf between the narrator and the strangers who he is observing: 'D'abord je vis deux femmes qui s'arrêtèrent devant la porte du pavillon, du côté de la rue'. After using several more descriptive imperfects to depict these women, Modiano then turns to the narrative imperfect to describe the arrival of other mourners: 'D'un taxi s'extrayait un vieil homme corpulent, le crane complètement chauve, de grosses poches sous les yeux brides de Mongol. Il s'engageait dans l'allée'. This drawn-out use of the imperfect, sustained during the next three paragraphs, in which nine more mourners arrive, emphasises the narrator's

anguished suspense as he vainly tries to recognise his erstwhile companion from among this group of people. When a likely candidate arrives, there is a change back to the preterite, as the narrator is galvanised into action: 'Je traversai la rue et les attendis' (p. 31). A move to the narrative present follows immediately, heightening the dramatic tension of the moment of recognition:

Ils se rapprochent, se rapprochent. Il me semble que l'homme de haute taille me dévisage avant de s'engager dans l'allée avec les deux autres. Derrière les fenêtres à vitraux qui donnent sur l'allée, des cierges brûlent. Il s'incline pour franchir la porte, beaucoup trop basse pour lui, et j'ai la certitude que c'est Stioppa.

Thus, in the space of a page and a half, Modiano has used four different narrative tenses to convey the narrator's rapidly changing state of mind as he takes steps to unravel the mystery surrounding his identity. This multifocal approach persists throughout the book, in which no single narrative tense persists for any length of time, so that the novel can be considered to constitute an excellent example of Judge's *système multifocal*, a system which she considers to be 'fort sophistiqué' and characterised by 'le principe du changement d'optique'.<sup>51</sup> That there is little connection between the time at which the events of the novel are purported to have taken place and the choice of narrative tense is borne out by a comparison between Chapters X and XXXIV. The former of these is the only substantial chapter of the book in which the *passé simple* occurs without contestation from the *passé composé*, while the latter contains no instances of the preterite. The episode recounted in Chapter X, however, occurred many years after that related in Chapter XXXIV. The *passé simple*, therefore, appears to have been selected in the earlier chapter to convey the emotional distance experienced by the narrator during a very awkward meeting with a man whom he believes may be his cousin. In contrast, the narrative present and perfect tenses chosen for the third-person narration of an interlude in Vichy more than twenty years previously, and sustained throughout Chapter XXXVII, which describes the narrator's subsequent escape into Switzerland, indicate a much greater degree of involvement on his part in these more distant happenings. Clearly, then, the function of narrative tenses in this novel is not primarily temporal but serves rather to indicate the narrator's shifting mental state as he grapples with the ghosts of the past.

<sup>51</sup> Judge, A: 'Les Manuels face à l'évolution des temps du passé dans le contexte de l'écrit' in *Les Cahiers du Centre International d'Études Pédagogiques* (Faire une grammaire, faire de la grammaire), 2001, 99-108, p. 101.



The period following *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* can be regarded as transitional, marking a shift towards an identity quest which is at once more strongly rooted in the present and less guilt ridden than that of the earlier novels. This change is reflected by two alterations in the author's use of the *passé simple*: a gradual diminution in its frequency and a corresponding rise in its temporal rather than its emotional incidence. Thus, in *Une jeunesse*, Modiano's seventh novel, described by Morris as mirroring the end of the writer's 'state of *dérive*',<sup>52</sup> a couple's return to their adolescence in Paris is narrated mainly in the *temps du récit*, in accordance with the conventions of the third-person narrative with which the author experiments here. Deviations from this traditional tense usage are minor: the first ten pages of the book, which frame the narrative, are written chiefly in the narrative present, while two short interludes in the *passé composé*, both involving the female narrator, introduce a note of subjectivity into the text. Although Modiano abandons sustained use of the third person and *passé simple* after this novel, he does not revert to the anarchic tense mixing of his earlier works: switching between *passé simple* and *passé composé*, in decline in *De si braves garçons* and *Quartier perdu*, is reduced to only one short episode in *Dimanches d'août* before disappearing in *Vestiaire de l'enfance*.

*Vestiaire de l'enfance* inaugurates a new phase in Modiano's literary identity quest, in which the search for self is perceived to necessitate a reappraisal of the past, in which false and repressed memories are confronted rather than being buried. Thus the denial of past trauma implicit in the closing lines of *Quartier perdu*: 'Moi aussi, à partir d'aujourd'hui, je veux ne plus me souvenir de rien' (p.184) is replaced by a more positive attitude: 'il faut essayer de retrouver les personnes et les objets perdus' (p. 130). As discussed in the previous chapter, this renegotiation of identity through a reassessment of the past leads to circularity and spirality. Having re-examined episodes from the painful period of his or her adolescence, the narrator returns to the present filled with 'une sensation de légèreté',<sup>53</sup> as the demons of the past are exorcised and a new beginning seems possible. This significant shift in the focus of the search for self is paralleled by a reduction in the incidence of the *passé simple* and a corresponding increase in the occurrence of the narrative present and *passé composé*, around which the narration now revolves. Futures, conditionals and question forms also become more prevalent in Modiano's more forward-looking later novels.

In *Vestiaire de l'enfance*, for the first time in Modiano's *oeuvre*, the *passé simple* is completely absent. The exclusion of the preterite in this novel strengthens the contrast

<sup>52</sup> Patrick Modiano (1996), p. 103.

<sup>53</sup> *Vestiaire de l'enfance*, p. 135.

between stasis and movement which characterises the narrative. Thus sections in which the intemporal present dominates are juxtaposed with episodes written mainly in the *passé composé*, in which the narrator gradually becomes reconnected with his lost past. Although the circular narrative suggests that he does not in fact succeed in breaking free from his limbo-like existence, the use of the future hints at the possibility of subsequent progression, involving redemption through writing, a theme echoed in later novels: 'J'abandonnerai mon travail à Radio-Mundial et la rédaction de mon feuilleton pour écrire l'histoire de cette ville' (p. 44). The ambiguity inherent in this conclusion is maintained throughout this phase in Modiano's writing by the juxtaposition of structurally simpler novels in which the author/narrator confronts more directly than before episodes from his troubled past and more strongly fictionalised works in which the narrative is more convoluted. In the former, the *passé simple* is rare or absent, while in the latter, some *passé simple/passé composé* tense mixing still subsists. An example from each category will illustrate this parallel development in Modiano's use of narrative tenses.

The relatively straightforward narrative of *Remise de peine*, in which Modiano provides a lightly fictionalised account of a period in his childhood shortly before his brother's death, makes significant use of the *temps du discours*, with intrusions in the present to signal retrospection. The preterite is not used in this work, which has a directness befitting the sober theme of irretrievable loss which dominates it. Tense usage in this novel, however, is not completely orthodox: in an episode describing the two brothers' night-time visit to an abandoned *château*, the writer makes innovative use of the narrative imperfect and conditional tenses. As Jean-Michel Adam has pointed out,<sup>54</sup> Modiano's unorthodox use of these tenses in phrases such as 'Nous choisirions une nuit où Annie n'était pas là' (pp. 49-50) and 'Nous entrions dans le hall, mon frère et moi' (p. 52) makes it impossible for the reader to decide whether this visit took place once, repeatedly or not at all. Thus the author, through subtle tense usage, succeeds in maintaining ambiguity and conveying the fantasy atmosphere of childhood.

In the short novel *Chien de printemps*, written five years later, Modiano's innovative use of narrative tenses reflects both temporal complexity and continued ambivalence as to the outcome of the identity quest. The narrative, in which the narrator examines his relationship in his late teens with a famous photographer who subsequently disappears, is chronologically complex in that it involves a multiplicity of time layers: the narrator's present, the period nearly 30 years previously of his association with the photographer, many intervening points and also the future. To complicate matters still

<sup>54</sup> 'Mémoire et fiction', p. 44.

further, Modiano makes original use of deictics, emphasising the subjectivity of the narrator's perception of time. In the following quotation, the author uses a wide range of tenses to link past, present and future, as well as a deliberate mismatch between verb tense and adverb, a device which has been described by Vuillaume as involving the reader in an interpretation of the text in which 'le présent se déplace'.<sup>55</sup>

Aujourd'hui, l'air était léger, les bourgeons avaient éclaté aux arbres du jardin de l'Observatoire et le mois d'avril 1992 se fondait par un phénomène de surimpression avec celui d'avril 1964, et avec d'autres mois d'avril dans le futur. Le souvenir de Jansen m'a poursuivi l'après-midi et me poursuivrait toujours: Jansen demeurerait quelqu'un que j'avais à peine eu le temps de connaître (pp. 17-18).

This rich combination of tenses to evoke successive temporal layers, whose presence to the narrator does not correspond to their distance in time, persists throughout the novel. In addition, the preterite is used on two occasions with markedly differing effects. Near the beginning of the novel, its use to provide background biographical information about Jansen's past is conventional. Later, however, Modiano reverts to his preferred use of tense switching involving the *passé simple* to alter the perspective of the narrative. The narrator, having published his first book not long after the photographer's disappearance, seems to have made progress in his search for self: 'J'étais enfin sorti de cette période de flou et d'incertitude pendant laquelle je vivais en fraude' (p. 108). This stability is nevertheless revealed to be precarious: when, twelve years later, he sets out to revisit Fossombrone to seek out one of Jansen's former acquaintances, an abrupt change of focus reflects the narrator's continued vulnerability. The unsuccessful quest is related in the preterite for reasons which are highlighted by the narrator himself: 'Le soleil du début d'après-midi, les rares voyageurs et cette visite à des gens que je n'avais vus qu'une seule fois, quinze ans auparavant, et qui avaient sans doute disparu ou m'avaient oublié me causèrent brusquement un sentiment d'irréalité' (p. 80). Thus a clear connection is established here between the use of the *passé simple* and the impression of emotional distance experienced by the author when abruptly confronted by disconcerting memories from the past.

In the last of the four phases identified above, this use of the preterite to symbolise emotional distance finally disappears. With the publication of *Dora Bruder* in 1997, Modiano's fictional identity quest reaches its final stage. By selecting a real subject and displacing his search for self onto her, Modiano broadens the scope of his autofictional enterprise, giving it a wider resonance. His use of tenses in this work is instructive: the

<sup>55</sup> *Grammaire temporelle des récits*, p. 87.

story of his search for Dora, though involving many time layers, is told mainly in the *temps du discours*, punctuated by frequent returns to the narrator's present and to the future: 'J'ai écrit ces pages en novembre 1996. Les journées sont souvent pluvieuses. Demain nous entrerons dans le mois de décembre et cinquante ans auront passé depuis la fugue de Dora' (p. 50). Very frequent questions interrupt the narrative, reinforcing the impossibility of retrieving the past. Sections of the text referring specifically to events directly connected with the Holocaust are, however, recounted in the preterite, emphasising the irrevocability of these terrible events, in which the French authorities were complicit. The most sustained use of this tense is reserved for the poignant moment at the end of the novel when Dora and her family are deported from Drancy to Auschwitz. A single question in the *passé composé* concerning her mother's last meeting with Dora: 'A-t-elle pu rendre visite à Dora aux Tourelles un jeudi ou un dimanche de cet été 1942?' (p. 144) constitutes the only break in the inexorable flow of preterites which describes the family's deportation. Thus, in this ground-breaking novel, Modiano abandons *passé simple/passé composé* tense mixing in favour of a strict separation between the *discours* appropriate to the narration of his personal search for Dora and the *récit* of her cruel fate.

After this work, Modiano makes no more sustained use of the preterite, which is absent from his next novel, *La Petite Bijou*, and occurs only once in *Des inconnues* and *Accident nocturne*. Clearly, having attained a degree of catharsis through his empathy with Dora, the author no longer feels the need to portray his narrators as estranged from reality. He does, however, continue to switch between narrative tenses for dramatic effect, as demonstrated by the following example from *La Petite Bijou*, in which the narrator, having caught an unexpected glimpse of her long-lost mother on the underground, anxiously awaits her reappearance:

J'ai retrouvé le même chemin, les jours suivants. À l'heure exacte où je l'avais rencontrée la première fois, j'attendais, assise sur un banc, à la station Châtelet. Je guettais le manteau jaune. Le portillon s'ouvre au départ du metro, le flot des voyageurs se répand sur le quai. À la prochaine rame, ils s'entasseront dans les wagons (p. 23).

Here the change from past tenses to the narrative present and then to the future adds immediacy and breadth to an important moment in the story. Although doubts still remain, the novel ends on a positive note: 'c'était le début de la vie' (p. 153). A strong element of ludism is apparent in Modiano's last two works: the middle of the three short tales which comprise *Des inconnues* ends with the female narrator shooting the male employer who

tries to rape her, while the complicated narrative of *Accident nocturne* can be read as a gentle mockery by Modiano of his literary identity quest, from which he is at last able to stand back. Many humorous touches are present in this novel, as in the following example when he ridicules the theme of the *éternel retour*. When trying to trace a former girlfriend, he answers the telephone, hoping to hear her, only to be disappointed:

Et j'étais vraiment déçu. J'avais espéré entendre la voix d'Hélène Navachine. Qu'est-ce qu'elle avait bien pu devenir, depuis tout ce temps? La dernière fois que je l'avais vue en rêve, celui-ci s'était interrompu sans qu'elle ait eu le temps de me donner son adresse et son numéro de téléphone (p. 62).

In conclusion, Modiano, while not exhibiting as wide a range of use of narrative tense systems as Duras, makes complex and variable use of tenses in his fiction. Alongside occasional quite conventional use of the preterite, he develops a more innovative use of this tense in combination with both the present tense and other past tenses, notably the *passé composé*, to convey the emotional instability inherent in the identity quest, experimenting frequently with multifocality in some of his best-known works. As his search for self advances, however, he makes diminishing use of *passé simple/passé composé* tense mixing while continuing to use narrative tenses adventurously. Whereas his use of these tenses is too diverse to be pigeonholed, varying subtly according to the subject matter and narrative complexity of each novel, a clear correlation can nevertheless be established between the progression of the identity quest and the author's decreasing reliance on *passé simple/passé composé* tense mixing.

While Darrieussecq, like Duras and Modiano, makes innovative use of narrative tenses in her fiction, it is difficult at first sight to discern a progression in her tense usage similar to that demonstrated by the other two authors. In her six novels to date, she avails herself of three of the systems identified by Judge, the *système du discours*, the *système du présent narratif* and the *système multifocal*. Her earliest work, *Truismes*, belongs to the first category, her third, fourth and fifth works, *Le Mal de mer*, *Bref séjour chez les vivants* and *White*, are centred on the narrative present and her second and sixth books, *Naissance des fantômes* and *Le Pays*, can be considered to be multifocal. Thus developments in tense usage do not appear to follow on from each other, as the multifocality experimented with early in the author's writing career is then left in abeyance for a period of several years. If, however, Darrieussecq's use of narrative tenses is considered in conjunction with the adventurous use of pronouns discussed earlier in this chapter, a pattern characterised by

increasing complexity emerges: having introduced *passé simple/passé composé* tense mixing into *Naissance des fantômes* and different types of pronoun switching into *Le Mal de mer* and *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, she combines both in her most recent novel, *Le Pays*, using these linguistic devices to reflect the increasing self-reflexivity of her identity quest.

I shall now examine Darrieussecq's changing use of tenses, considering in turn each of the narrative patterns mentioned above. The author's choice of tense system for her first novel reflects its subject. The artless first-person narration relies heavily on the *système du discours*: the tale of the narrator's gradual transformation into a sow is related almost entirely in the perfect and imperfect tenses, with no instances of the preterite. The only significant deviation from this conventional pattern concerns the use of the present tense, together with occasional pointers into the future, to frame the narrative, as in the opening sentence of the novel: 'Je sais à quel point cette histoire pourra semer de trouble et d'angoisse, à quel point elle perturbera de gens' (p. 11). The present punctuates the text at regular intervals, reminding the reader of the novel's retrospective dimension, and the tale ends, as it has started, in the present. Tense switching, then, is not entirely absent from this novel but its use for framing purposes is unremarkable, so that tense usage in this early work does not deviate significantly from conventional narrative practice.

The same cannot be said of *Le Mal de mer*, *Bref séjour chez les vivants* and *White*, where the narrative present takes over as the main vehicle for the story. In this respect Darrieussecq can be seen to be following a trend among modern French novelists, described by Judge as follows: 'Bien que le système du récit demeure la norme, on remarque un emploi de plus en plus fréquent du présent narratif'.<sup>56</sup> *Le Mal de mer*, the first of Darrieussecq's works to be centred on the narrative present, conforms closely to the type of novel in which, according to Judge, this tense usage is most likely to be found: 'Il est souvent – mais pas toujours – employé dans le récit personnel, intériorisé, vu son aptitude à suivre les méandres du rêve et de la pensée'.<sup>57</sup> In this novel, in which changes of focus are provided by pronoun switching rather than by tense mixing, the narrative present creates an atmosphere of immediacy and involvement, as each subject in turn is presented in close up instead of through the longer lens of the past. There are no instances of the preterite in *Le Mal de mer*, in which retrospection is provided by the perfect and imperfect tenses and prospection through occasional uses of the future. The narrative present, however, remains dominant throughout, imparting urgency to this story of quest and flight, as well as

<sup>56</sup> 'Choix entre le présent narrative et le système multifocal', p. 233.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

invoking an impression of simultaneity. Thus many of the short sections into which the narrative is subdivided begin with a sentence headed by a pronoun relating to one of the unnamed protagonists followed by a verb in the narrative present. This rapid switching of the spotlight between the main characters enables the reader to envisage their different experiences in parallel: the daughter's anxious irresolution: 'Elle joue avec les lacets de ses baskets, elle fait une rosette, une autre, puis les défait et recommence' (p. 56) is juxtaposed with the mother's resourceful house hunting: 'Elle est heureuse d'avoir trouvé si vite' (p. 51), the assiduity of the detective who is hunting the fugitives: 'Il appelle le client' (p. 117) and the grandmother's physical and mental suffering: 'Elle tord le cou, quatre infirmières l'empêchent de bouger' (p. 127).

Having experimented successfully with the narrative present in *Le Mal de mer*, Darrieussecq retains it in her next two novels, both of which, while still based round this tense, contain a richer temporal mixture than the earlier work. Occasional use of the preterite can be found in each of these novels, adding depth to the narrative: as Judge has observed, the non-systematic use of this tense in conjunction with a different tense system 'donne une profondeur supplémentaire au texte'.<sup>58</sup> In *Bref séjour chez les vivants*, which is considerably more wide-ranging than its predecessor, drawing on a variety of source material, the *passé simple* is used in extracts from fairy tales (p. 44, p. 59) while in *White* it is used to give biographical details of the troubled family history of one of the protagonists, Peter (pp. 113-4). These instances of the preterite, while extending the scope of the narrative, do not, however, compare with the much more innovative use of this tense in *Naissance des fantômes* and *Le Pays*, to which I shall return. *Bref séjour chez les vivants* is significantly more linguistically innovative than *Le Mal de mer*, making frequent use of elliptical language in which participles and infinitives, or no verb at all, replace the dominant narrative present. Thus Jeanne's nightmare vision of a scene in an Argentinian gaol is described as follows: 'femme accouchant dans sa cellule et mordant son enfant à l'oreille. Tableau. Balle dans la tête, enfant volé marqué chez le général l'amiral le commandante' (p. 89) while a verbless phrase perfectly encapsulates the circular motion of the game played by a man and a dog on the beach, as witnessed by Nore: 'lancer du bâton, retour du bâton, lancer du bâton, retour' (p. 79). This stream-of-consciousness language, in which capital letters and punctuation are often omitted and different typefaces are used, together with snippets of other languages, notably English and Spanish, is well suited to a

<sup>58</sup> See unpublished paper entitled 'Passé simple, imparfait et plus-que-parfait du subjonctif: Dinosaures ou caméléons? Et faut-il les enseigner', given at the Association for French Language Studies annual conference in St. Andrews, 2002, p.7.

narrative which is portrayed entirely through the thoughts of the different protagonists. Conditionals are used quite frequently to suggest the uncertain future of the emotionally damaged family members, such as Anne, who imagines that aliens are trying to recruit her: 'Le recruteur viendrait et il la recruterait' (p. 10). For Jeanne, who has fled to a new linguistic environment to escape her traumatic past in France, questions of identity are closely bound up with those of language: she wonders if she is still the same person as before, playing on future forms which chillingly evoke her fate at the end of the novel when contemplating the topic of linguistic identity: 'Qui rit vendredi dimanche pleurera. Pleurra. Pleurira. Llorará' (p. 95, author's italics). As in *Le Mal de mer*, multifocality is provided in this novel by pronoun switching rather than by tense mixing, the addition of first- to third-person shifting to the frequent movement between unidentified narrators creating added complexity. The atmosphere of simultaneity present in the earlier novel is reinforced in *Bref séjour chez les vivants* by the precise use of deictics, indicating what each family member is doing at a given time. Darrieussecq's use of the narrative present in conjunction with two types of pronoun switching in this novel is thus highly effective in creating the impression of a web of unspoken solidarity between the troubled members of this family torn apart by past trauma. The movement towards increasing linguistic complexity displayed in *Bref séjour chez les vivants* is not, however, sustained in *White*. While Darrieussecq continues to use tenses and ellipsis quite adventurously in this novel and some change of focus is provided by the use of three different narrative voices, Peter, Edmée and the chorus of ghosts, it is both slighter in content and less linguistically interesting than its predecessor.

Darrieussecq's most unconventional use of narrative tenses involves her espousal of a multifocal system consisting of extensive *passé simple/passé composé* tense mixing combined with variable use of the present tense. This temporal pattern is strongly in evidence in two of her novels, *Naissance des fantômes* and *Le Pays*, which, although separated by a seven-year gap, are linked in that the cathartic role of writing as a means of pursuing the search for self lies at their heart: both depict women who are exploring an identity crisis through literary self-expression. It would therefore appear that there is a connection between theme and tense usage in these two works. I shall now investigate the nature of this link, demonstrating how the author's very unorthodox use of narrative tenses in these novels reflects her continuing exploration of female identity.

To my mind, *Naissance des fantômes* constitutes Darrieussecq's most remarkable articulation of the identity quest in that, in her exploration of marital relations, she moves imperceptibly from the real world into the realm of metaphysics. Thus the husband's



disappearance, with which the novel opens, is gradually revealed to be a metaphor for his absence from his wife's life rather than a mystery which will be resolved during the course of the narrative. Darrieussecq's subversion of the conventions of the detective story in this work is mirrored by her adventurous use of narrative tenses: the novel begins in the *temps du discours*, oscillates for a time between *passé composé* and *passé simple* and finally settles into the *temps du récit*, in which it ends. I consider it to be multifocal both because of the occasional use of the present tense to frame the narrative and also because of the acute lack of stability which characterises its central section. Whereas this unusual use of narrative tenses involving the contestation of one narrative pattern by another has the appearance of a deliberate strategy on the author's part, Darrieussecq has insisted that this is not the case: when questioned on the subject, she asserted that her choice of tenses in this novel resulted directly from the subject matter.<sup>59</sup> This being the case, it is necessary to examine the nature of the narrative itself to determine the reasons behind this unusual use of tense mixing.

At the outset of the novel, the narrator is firmly rooted in the here-and-now, caught up in a mundane existence regulated by daily routine. The almost exclusive use of the *temps du discours* in the first chapter reflects the familiarity and contingency of this way of life, which revolves round tasks such as buying bread from the baker's, watering the busy lizzies and telephoning relatives. In a predictable universe such as this, husbands simply do not disappear without good reason. The sole very slight intrusion of the preterite in this chapter occurs during a *mise en abyme*, as the narrator, looking back on this banal lifestyle from a radically altered perspective, feels distanced from it: 'Ce soir-là, ce fut la dernière fois, à mon souvenir, que je réussis à me percevoir comme entière, pleine et ramassée; ensuite je me suis diffusée comme les galaxies, vaporisée très loin comme les géantes rouges' (p. 15). From the second chapter onwards, however, the identity crisis triggered by her husband's inexplicable absence destabilises the wife's tame but non-threatening way of life. The conflict which arises between two opposing perceptions of reality, in which the 'banalité douillette du réel' (p. 25) of her previous existence is challenged by a completely new vision of the universe, is symbolised by constant oscillation between the *passé composé* and the *passé simple*. The chapter opens in the *passé composé* but, significantly, the first sustained use of the preterite occurs shortly after the narrator's description of her new life as 'alternatif et pénible' (p. 31), reinforcing the connection between tense mixing

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<sup>59</sup> I asked her about her choice of tenses in this novel at a seminar entitled 'Comment j'écris', held at the Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies in London on June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2003, and she affirmed that her use of tenses was unconscious and flowed from the narrative.

and a shifting view of reality. For the remainder of the chapter, alternation between the perfect and the preterite underlines the inner turmoil of the narrator during the sleepless night which follows her husband's unaccountable disappearance, as the following examples will demonstrate: 'J'eus la tentation d'éteindre la lumière' (p. 33), 'Quand je suis sortie de la salle de bains je me sentais un peu mieux' (p. 33), 'Assez rapidement, cependant, je rallumai et décidai d'aller me faire une camomille' (p. 37), 'Je suis retournée me coucher' (p. 39).

Having established this pattern of frequent movement between the *temps du discours* and the *temps du récit*, Darrieussecq sustains it throughout the next four chapters. A gradual shift towards the *passé simple*, however, can be detected: in contrast with the first three chapters of the novel, this tense occurs before the *passé composé* in Chapters IV, V and VI. Whereas tense mixing is retained to symbolise the narrator's fluctuating emotions as she retreats to the beach to contemplate her new husbandless state, her growing detachment from her past life is evident from the way in which she now views her friendship with Jacqueline, the epitome of domesticity, through the long lens of the preterite: 'La visite de Jacqueline eut quelque chose d'irréel' (p. 73). Towards the end of Chapter VII, after a seminal episode in which the narrator is finally able to articulate the loss of her husband to a group of strangers who have come to her aid: 'je leur annonçai calmement que mon mari était mort' (p. 106), the *passé composé* finally disappears from the novel, which continues in the *temps du récit*. Clearly, then, this change of narrative pattern represents the resolution of the narrator's inner conflict, as she rejects her husband's domination of her life. Her subsequent reapprehension of him in another dimension is related using a tense system associated with distance from the quotidian, objectivity and non-contingency. By the end of the novel, the narrator's new perception of reality allows her to leave her husband behind her and to embark on a new life as a writer.

*Passé simple/passé composé* tense mixing, then, is used by Darrieussecq with considerable originality in *Naissance des fantômes* to reflect the protagonist's journey from dependence to autonomy. In her most recent work, *Le Pays*, the author returns to multifocality, combining it with pronoun switching in a sustained exploration of identity in the context of nationality, the family and the nature of the writing process. This novel is considerably more linguistically complex than *Naissance des fantômes*, reflecting its wider scope. Pronoun switching between *je* and *elle* characterises the narrative, which also contains instances of the *je clivé*, and tense usage includes frequent shifting between the narrative present and the past as well as tense mixing involving the perfect and the preterite, together with frequent occurrences of the narrative imperfect and pluperfect. This

anarchic use of both pronoun switching and tense mixing reflects the fluidity of the novel, which moves between the subjectivity of the narrator's private journal and the objectivity of the book which she is writing. The impression of fluidity is reinforced by the narrator's name, Marie Rivière, as well as by frequent references to rivers: we are told, for example, that '*La vie est une rivière*' (p. 178, author's italics). In the central section of the novel, entitled 'La Langue', the liquid metaphor is sustained through the observation that 'Langue, en français, est l'anagramme de lagune' (p. 141). The constant shifting between tenses and pronouns which characterises the novel also mirrors the theme of alternation which Darrieussecq perceives to underlie the writing process and which, as elsewhere in her fiction, she depicts in physical rather than psychological terms: 'Intuitivement, il lui semblait que l'écriture résultait bien d'une alternance, mais pas celle des états d'âme, plutôt celle des états du corps: quand le corps était là, ou qu'il n'était pas là' (p. 117). Paradoxically, both physical effort, as portrayed in the running scene with which the novel opens, and mental effort, as encapsulated by the gestation of the novel which is the principal subject of the narrative, are described as having the same result: 'l'absence à soi-même, l'accès au monde sans le *je*' (p. 179, author's italics). As the author/narrator embarks on her literary enterprise, she is caught in an intermediate space between two worlds: 'Tout était distant et surréel, j'étais dans *Le Pays* et pas dans le pays. L'espace entre les deux était un territoire, un pays de possibles' (p. 225).

Darrieussecq's tense usage in the novel reflects this *entre deux*, as she moves constantly between past and present and between *discours* and *récit*. Significantly, the novel opens in a tense which lies between the last two options, the narrative imperfect. Like Duras and Modiano, the author uses this narrative device to evoke a midway stage between differing mental states. Thereafter, tense usage is anarchic, shifting frequently between the narrative present and the two contrasting past tenses, bridged by the imperfect. Unlike *Naissance des fantômes*, this novel shows no clear progression from one tense system to another: both in the *je* and *elle* sections, changes between the *système du présent narratif*, the *temps du discours* and the *temps du récit* are frequent and apparently random, so that the work can be considered to be an excellent example of the *système multifocal*. Darrieussecq's adventurous use of tenses in this novel can be seen to have its roots in the author/narrator's original concept of space in temporal terms which underlies her autofictional project: 'Le pays n'était pas un lieu, c'était du temps, du temps feuilleté, et elle était revenue y habiter' (p. 209). In a curious mirror image of Modiano's universe, in which time layers are often represented geographically, Darrieussecq envisages the country to which the narrator returns in temporal rather than in spatial terms. These 'plaques

temporelles' are connected by 'passerelles mentales et toboggans logiques' (p. 209). Thus mental rather than temporal distance from an event appears to dictate tense selection. This is demonstrated by the use of the *passé composé* and narrative present for more distant events, such as the narrator's farewell to her brother before she leaves Paris: 'Je suis venue lui dire que je rentre au pays' (p. 30) and her journey to her native land: 'Dans l'avion qui nous emmène au pays, je regarde par le hublot. Tiot s'est endormi sur mes genoux. Diego lit le journal' (p. 41). In contrast, the use of the preterite for more recent events surrounding the birth of the narrator's baby underlines their momentous nature, as in the description of the baby's first stirrings in the womb: 'Elle me fit signe comme je montais sur l'escabeau' (p. 124) and of the couple's visit to the new baby shortly after her birth: 'Nous ouvrîmes la porte du fond, Diego et moi, et la lueur rose-orange dansa. Le tour de lit la masquait dans l'angle; nous nous décalâmes, et nous la vîmes' (p. 295). Occasionally Darrieussecq, like Modiano, makes startling use of deictics: 'Ce jour-là, 11 mai 1981, à l'âge de douze ans, elle comprend que ses parents sont cinglés' (p. 173). Here the mismatch between the time reference and the tense clearly demonstrates that the reasons behind the author's narrative choice are emotional rather than temporal.

In *Le Pays*, Darrieussecq makes her most complex use of narrative tenses to date, combining tense mixing with pronoun shifting to vary the perspective on the narrator as she explores the shifting sands of the return to her origins. While the author's differentiation between the *passé composé* and the *passé simple* is less clear cut than in *Naissance des fantômes*, her frequent switching between a wide variety of tenses emphasises the subjectivity inherent in the exploration of the tension between past and present and between the writing and the written selves.

My three selected authors, then, all make innovative use of narrative tenses as part of their fictional identity quests. For the two female writers, the narrative present is increasingly attractive, suggesting the immediacy and the urgency of the quest. In Duras's hands, it acquires at times an atemporal quality, while Darrieussecq uses it effectively to build up a web of family identity. Modiano, while making slighter use of the narrative present, exploits the contrast between past and present to highlight the retrospective nature of his search for self. All three writers make differing but significant use of the contrast between the *passé simple* and the *passé composé* in the context of the identity quest. The identity of one of Duras's best-known characters, Lol V. Stein, is mediated through subtle use of these tenses, while, for Modiano, *passé simple/passé composé* tense mixing symbolises the anguish of his earlier narrators. Darrieussecq, unlike the other two authors, rather than gradually reducing her use of the *passé simple*, seems to be giving this tense a

greater role in her developing exploration of the self. All three writers, when moving between different temporal systems, have recourse to the narrative imperfect to effect a gradual change of focus. They thus conform to a pattern in which the growing use of this narrative option appears to be linked to an increasingly subjective apprehension of the self. At times the dual systems referred to above are combined in a truly multifocal approach in which unorthodox tense usage reflects the complexity of the literary *invention de soi*.

A close correlation can, then, be discerned between my chosen writers' preoccupation with identity and their use of pronoun switching and tense mixing. All three authors make systematic use of these linguistic devices in the context of a subjective search for self which is based on the perception of identity as constantly shifting and which therefore necessitates frequent adjustments in position between author, narrator and subject. Rapid changes of focus characterise this identity quest in which the exploration of *soi possibles* is expressed in terms of the splitting and merging of selves. Although each writer combines pronoun switching and tense mixing in different ways, a common pattern emerges in which innovative pronoun usage highlights the tension between selfhood and Otherness, while the adventurous use of narrative tenses allows for the expression of emotional as well as temporal distance between past and present selves. My selected authors' predilection for these linguistic features, then, demonstrates an underlying similarity of approach to the exploration of the self in the outwardly very disparate identity quests of Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I have combined a broad-brush approach with detailed textual analysis in order to throw light on the development of the identity quest in the modern French novel. My study of three major French authors from successive generations, Marguerite Duras, Patrick Modiano and Marie Darrieussecq, has revealed hitherto unsuspected similarities between these writers, indicating a significant element of continuity in the postmodern search for self.

In Chapter 1, by choosing to examine the writers' treatments of the search for self through an exploration of the subthemes of national, gender and family identity, I both highlighted the individuality of each author's approach and uncovered a considerable degree of resemblance in their attitudes towards selfhood. Thus Modiano's pressing need to fill his inner void was shown to contrast markedly with Duras's progressive emptying of the self and the difference between the strongly gendered quests of the two women writers and Modiano's ungendered search for self was emphasised. At the same time, underlying similarities emerged from my study: all three authors were seen to explore the expression and construction of identity from a marginalised position, to perceive identity performatively in terms of *soi possibles* and to reflect in their novels the historical and family environments in which they were raised.

In subsequent chapters I progressively narrowed down my enquiry, examining the effects of the three writers' common preoccupation with identity on genre and narrative form, narrative structure and language. Further strong similarities between my chosen authors were revealed during this process and were shown to result directly from the writers' shared impulsion to push back the frontiers of fiction in their pursuit of selfhood. Thus, in Chapter 2, I demonstrated that Duras, Modiano and Darrieussecq all adopt an eclectic approach to genre and narrative form, borrowing freely from different traditions and crossing conventional boundaries. The three authors retreat to the *entre deux* to explore identity, engage to a variable extent with the ambivalent new genre of autofiction and make ludic use of elements from the detective story. Darrieussecq, in addition, makes considerable use of the fantastic in her fictional search for self. I would argue that these characteristics enable the majority of the writers' novels to be identified as *récits indécidables*.

In Chapters 3 and 4 I moved from areas which have received a certain amount of general critical attention into relatively uncharted waters. Having examined the effects of memory on narrative structure in Chapter 3, I proposed and identified in my authors' fiction a number of narrative patterns appropriate to the fictional identity quest, where linearity no longer holds sway: the circle, the spiral, the web, the parallel and the hiatus. This is a field where further research would be desirable to examine the prevalence of such patterns in the work of other novelists exploring the identity quest. In the final chapter of the thesis I took the unusual step of venturing into the field of linguistics in order to apply recent theoretical work to the modern French novel. This cross-disciplinary approach proved fertile, enabling me to identify pronoun switching and tense mixing as salient linguistic features in my chosen authors' novels and to link these devices conclusively to the search for self. By examining my chosen authors' innovative use of narrative tenses in the light of Judge's newly defined system, I established a connection between dual and multifocal tense usage and shifting selfhood. Here again, my research indicates that there is scope for further work in order to identify other modern French writers who make adventurous use of personal pronouns and narrative tenses in the context of the identity quest.

The originality of this study lies in the application of material from a range of disciplines to a considerable body of fiction by three pioneering authors. By adopting such a wide-ranging approach I have demonstrated a surprisingly high degree of concordance between these outwardly disparate authors, proving that the exploration of shifting selves in a postmodern context does indeed have observable generic, structural and linguistic consequences and thus enabling each writer's novels to be perceived in terms of the progressive interrogation of selfhood which characterises the modern French novel. Although Duras's *oeuvre* has received much critical attention, my consideration of her novels in their entirety and from a linguistic as well as a literary perspective has shed further light on her role as an innovator in the fictional exploration of identity. My treatment of Modiano's extensive output, including his most recent writing, as a whole has enabled me to discern in it a previously unidentified overall pattern consisting of a fictional prelude, an autofictional centre and an autobiographical coda, which leads to the speculative conclusion that his literary identity quest is perhaps at an end. As far as Darrieussecq's little-studied fiction is concerned, I have established an underlying rationale linking her apparently dissimilar novels and have noted a shift by the author towards autofiction, a trend which I expect to be confirmed in her subsequent work. My global

approach to the novels of these three prominent writers has, then, illuminated their significant contributions to the development of the French literary identity quest.



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